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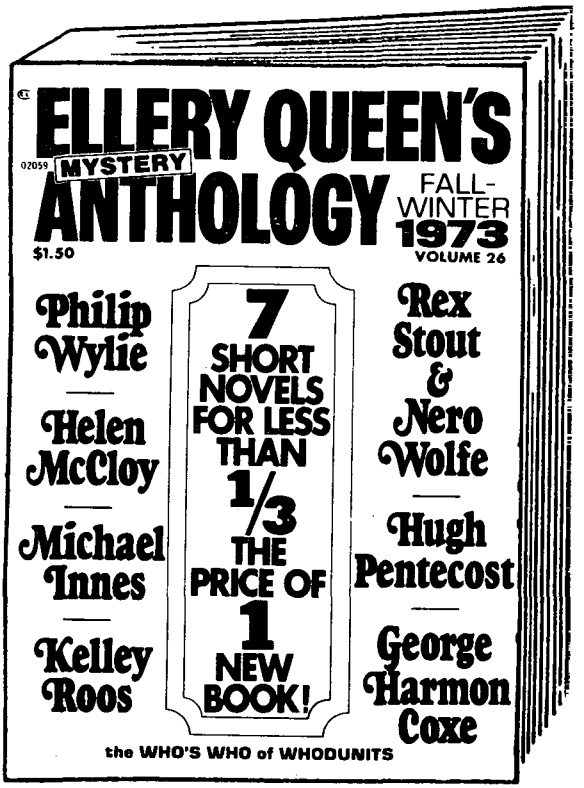

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a *NEW* story of crime and detection by

PATRICIA McGERR

Paul and Joe Garrison were brothers, and their faces bore a strong family resemblance—especially the "Garrison nose." Joe was an ex-con, a criminal with a record. Paul was trying hard to be an honest man, but he was desperately in need of money.

Patricia McGerr puts it all together, and then brings Lieutenant Thurmond of Homicide on the scene . . .

A CHOICE OF MURDERS

by PATRICIA McGERR

My brother Joe never was any good. When we were boys—though I was two years older—he was the ringleader in all our scrapes. We started by stealing candy and cigarettes from the corner store and progressed to socks, ties, and cuff links. When I was 18 we were caught joyriding in a stranger's car and drew a six-month suspended sentence. That scared me out of any criminal leanings, but not Joe.

His next arrest was for carting a typewriter and adding machine from the school office. That put him in the reformatory for a year. When he came out he was ready for the big time. I tried to steer clear of him, but every couple of weeks he'd drop by the restaurant where I was night manager to flash a roll of bills.

"You want to be poor all your life?" he taunted. "You like ringing up nickels and dimes for somebody else?"

"I want to stay out of jail," I answered. "You like being locked up?"

"I was a green kid," he came back. "But I learned a lot on the inside. They won't catch up with me again. And I could put you onto some good things."

"I don't want any part of it. Whatever you're doing, I don't even want to know about it."

"You always were chicken, Paul," he said. "But okay, it's

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your loss. When I'm king of the rackets you can pretend not to know me."

The flaw in that was our strong family resemblance. We both had corn-yellow hair, long thin faces, and what our mother always referred to as the "Garrison nose." The boss came in one night just as Joe was leaving and did a double take. The $200 suit and $40 shoes must have made him suspect for a minute that I'd been dipping into the till. Then he saw it wasn't me and breathed easier.

"The fellow who just went out," he said, "he must be your brother."

"That's right."

"So you got a rich relation. That's nice."

For a while he treated me with more respect. Which was fine until Joe was trapped with a closet full of heroin and his picture hit all the front pages. That's when I lost my job.

"Not that I hold a man's family against him," the boss apologized. "It's just that the picture looks so much like you. So the customers think I got a pusher in charge here. Well, Garrison, you see my problem."

I saw his problem and my own as well. The trial drew a lot of publicity and when I got on a bus the people would look at me and nudge each other. I was going with Lucille then and it was her idea that we should get married right away and leave town. I hadn't planned on an early marriage, but I liked the idea of a fresh start.

So we bought a license, took our tests, said the right words in front of a judge, and drove 800 miles to settle in a bigger city in another state where the Garrison name and Garrison nose were unknown. Two weeks after we left, Joe was found guilty and sentenced to ten years in a Federal prison. It was seven years before I saw him again.

I was sitting in the dining room of the Juniper Street house on Saturday evening about ten o'clock. Lucille had gone to bed early, sneezing and sniffling and complaining of a sore throat. The dinner dishes were stacked in the sink and the table was covered with papers—bills, tax forms, dunning letters. It was a bleak picture that had begun to take shape two years earlier when we bought this house.

Lucille had social aspirations she thought would be helped by moving to a more fashionable address. And that meant better furniture and more expensive clothes. But she didn't make any friends in the new neighborhood and all I got out of it was a mountain of debt. Now the mortgage payment was

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overdue and two stores had turned our accounts over to a collection agency. I was about to be sued, garnisheed, and foreclosed.

But that wasn't the worst of it. In my job I collected rents for an apartment management firm. Some of the tenants paid in cash and when I was hard pressed I used that money, then made it up from the following week's collections. Until now, by careful juggling, I'd managed to stay ahead of the game. But the auditor was about to check the books and I was nearly $1000 short. I could lose my job, maybe face criminal charges.

I'd get no sympathy from Lucille, that was certain. In her view it wasn't her extravagance that had caused our trouble but my inability to earn a decent living. So I was jotting down fresh columns of figures, adding and subtracting, and finding no hope anywhere. I was staring dismally at the numbers when the doorbell rang. Newsboy, I thought, after my last bit of change. I opened the door to find Joe on the porch.

"What—how—" Shock made me stammer.

"Call me a bad penny." He was as jaunty as ever. "I always keep turning up. Aren't you going to ask me in?"

"Yes, of course." I stepped back to let him come in, then closed the door. "What's happened? You didn't break out?"

"No way. I got my time off for being a good boy."

"Why didn't you let me know?" We'd exchanged infrequent letters. His last had been several months earlier.

"I love a surprise." He followed me back into the dining room and surveyed the clutter of papers. "Looks like you're still making it the hard way."

"If you need money," I began defensively, "I'd like to help you, but you've come at a bad time."

"Don't worry about little Joe." He reached inside his coat and pulled out a stack of bills. The one on the outside was a fifty. It was like old times. "To tell the truth, I had a touch in mind when I decided to look you up, but I ran into some luck on the way here. Now I'm in good shape."

"Maybe I should ask you for a loan." I tried to make it sound like a joke.

"Sorry, I need it all where I'm going." He returned the bills to his inside pocket.

"Where's that?"

"New York. I've friends there who'll put me back in business. But I can't make contact till Monday night, so I

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figured there was time for a family reunion."

"How did you find the house?"

"Easy. I studied the map in the railroad station and got a bus that dropped me two blocks away. Looks like a nice part of town. You're living high."

"Too high," I admitted. "I'm in way over my head. But you didn't come to hear my troubles. Are you hungry?"

"I ate on the train. But a Scotch would taste good right now. With just a little water."

"I'm sorry, but there's nothing in the house. Lucille doesn't—"

As if summoned by her name, Lucille appeared in the doorway. She was in her nightgown and held a pink cotton wrapper clutched tight around her middle.

"The bell woke me," she complained. "What's going on?" Her eyes rested on Joe's face, then narrowed in recognition. "You must be Paul's brother. When did you get out of jail?"

"Pleased to meet you, sister," he mocked. "You really know how to make a guy feel welcome."

"Don't think you can lay about here," she said. "You ruined the last town for us. You're not doing it again."

"Cool off, sister. I'm just passing through."

"He wants money, I suppose." She turned her anger on me. "Well, he's not going to get it. If you give him one single cent—"

"Damn it, I don't have one single cent." I waved at the table. "All I've got is bills and nothing to pay them with."

"Don't yell at me, Paul Garrison. I'm a sick woman. It's bad enough you're related to a convict without bringing him into my house. You send him on his way, you understand. At once!"

She spun round and headed back upstairs. Joe watched her go and the curl of his lips made me conscious of how quickly her girlish plumpness had turned to fat. Without makeup, her hair unkempt, she was an especially unlovely sight.

"You got yourself a charmer," he said. "If I had your problems I'd buy a nice big insurance policy. On the lady's life."

"I already have a policy. We're both insured."

"Then I'd take steps to collect it."

"That's not funny, Joe."

"Who's joking? Okay, big brother, I'll save my advice for somebody smart enough to listen. Now how about it? You going to throw me out?"

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"You can spend the night, of course. But there's no need for Lucille to know."

We sat on talking for an hour or so. Then I made up the cot in the television room for Joe to sleep on and went upstairs. Lucille heard me coming and switched on the bedside lamp, ready to pounce, as I entered the room.

"Is he gone?"

"He's my brother, Lu. I can't send him away in the middle of the night."

"I'm your wife, but that doesn't stop you from piling on aggravations. You know what my temperature is? A hundred and two! I've got fever and chills and my head is splitting. I won't be able to go to the concert tomorrow."

"That's too bad."

"Don't sound so happy. It won't get you out of going. At least you can bring home a program and tell me about the music."

"All right," I agreed, "if that's what you want. Maybe I can get a refund on your ticket."

Five bucks, I thought, to put in a pot that was $1000 short. The concert was the fourth in a series that Lucille had insisted on buying. I don't think she liked the longhair stuff any better than I did, but Culture was one of the rungs on her social ladder. So far all it had gotten her was a listing on the back of the program as a "friend" of the local symphony.

I got into bed but was a long time falling asleep. Joe's remark had put Lucille's insurance in my mind and I couldn't get it out. $10,000. More than enough to sweep away all my debts. Maybe what she had was more than a cold, worse than the flu. Maybe her temperature would keep rising, turn into pneumonia. I thought of raising the windows high to let in the March wind and help it along. But that was fantasy. Lucille was strong as a horse. She'd live to collect on my policy, not vice versa.

But the idea, having formed, kept nagging at me. By the time I dropped off, near dawn, I had worked out a plan to the smallest detail. Having a look-alike brother had caused me nothing but trouble in the past. At last I could make it work to my advantage.

By morning Lucille had added a hacking cough to her other symptoms. I carried her breakfast up on a tray and then told Joe my plan. He was all for it.

"You'll have to stay out of sight till evening," I explained, "and then sit through the first half of the concert in my place.

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After that the sooner you get out of town the better."

"That suits me fine," he said. "I've got my own reasons for not wanting to go out while it's light."

I divided the day between fetching and carrying for Lucille and probing my plan for possible pitfalls.

"I can pass for you among strangers," Joe pointed out. "But what if one of your seatmates tries to start a conversation?"

"They won't. There are a couple of old biddies on the aisle who don't even talk to each other. And the couple on the other side hasn't given us so much as a kind look since the series began. All you have to do is sit still and listen to the orchestra."

"That's another thing. What if the cops ask you about what they played. You can't expect music criticism from me."

"Of course not. My friends all know I can't tell Bach from Bacharach, that I just go to these things to humor Lucille. If the conductor has a fit or the cello catches fire, I'll need to know about it. Otherwise I can say I dozed through it all."

Joe spent an hour or so rubbing out his fingerprints and making sure the house showed no trace of his presence. Lucille, when she wasn't eating or sleeping or harassing me, passed her time on the phone talking to friends on the other side of town, where we used to live. When I was dressing for the concert, a dangerous thought occurred to me.

"Uh—Lu—" I approached the subject cautiously. "The people you talked to today—did you say anything about Joe's being here?"

"You think a jailbird brother-in-law is something to boast about?" She laughed hoarsely. "I've never even told anybody you have a brother."

Reassured, I shrugged into my purple and green checked sports jacket.

"You think you're going to the ballpark?" she shrilled. "That's no kind of coat for the symphony. You'll stand out like a sore thumb."

Which was exactly why I chose it. I adjusted the coat, straightened my tie, and said nothing.

Joe and I left the house at 7:30. It was a 20-minute drive to the Civic Auditorium and I had worked out a very exact timetable. At 7:50 I slid out of the car to let Joe take the wheel and circle the block. I went directly to the box office and told the man behind the wicket the sad story of my wife's illness. He had me write my name on a piece of paper,

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clipped it to Lucille's ticket, and said if anybody bought it I could get my money back. Then I went outside and waited for Joe to pick me up.

I traded my brightly colored jacket for his tan topcoat on a side street. Then Joe walked back to the auditorium and I drove home. I parked half a block away and walked the rest of the distance. Except for our bedroom the house was dark, just as I'd left it. I went in through the garage, which wasn't locked. It was exactly 8:22.

Like clockwork, I thought, and moved to the kitchen phone. Focusing my pocket flash on the dial, I called one of our old neighbors.

"Janet, this is Paul Garrison," I explained. "I'm at the auditorium and the concert is about to start. But Lucille's home with a bad cold and feeling pretty depressed. It might cheer her up to have a call from you."

"A fine time to be thinking of her," she responded tartly, "when you've left her all alone." Her opinion of me, based on Lucille's complaints, wasn't high. "If you're so worried, why didn't you stay with her?"

"I wanted to, but she insisted on my attending this concert. But I didn't call to argue. I just thought it would do her good to hear from an old friend. If you'd rather not be bothered—"

"Of course I'll call her," she bristled. "You just go ahead and enjoy yourself."

I put down the phone and, at the bottom of the stairs, stepped out of my shoes. As I did so, the phone rang. Good old Janet, fitting right into the plan. Up till then I'd been so absorbed in working out the minute-by-minute plan that I hadn't really thought about the end toward which it was all heading. Now suddenly it struck me. I was about to walk up these stairs and murder my wife.

It was a crazy idea, I told myself, a nightmare. I couldn't go through with it. Upstairs Lucille answered the phone. I moved higher till her voice, the whine louder than ever, was clear.

"That's right, Janet, he's gone off and left me alone. A lot he cares that I'm so sick I can hardly lift my head . . . His own pleasure, that's all that matters . . . Oh, that's not the half of it. If you knew what I put up with, day after day. . ."

The words and tone stiffened my resolve. I moved faster, crushing down thought till I was outside the bedroom door. Then I leaned against the

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wall, slid my gloved hand around the edge till it touched the switch, and turned off the light.

"Something's happened." Lucille's first reaction was unalarmed. "The light just went out, must be a fuse. Janet, I hear something—somebody—a burglar—oh, my God, he's coming for me—Janet, get help—hurry!"

I was on her then, my fingers round her throat. From the receiver she dropped came squawking sounds as Janet kept asking what was wrong, what was going on. I held tight, pressed hard with both thumbs till she went limp and there was no life left in her. Then I let her fall back on the bed and stood for a minute, disoriented.

My teeth began to chatter. Got to get out, I told myself. Get away before Janet sends the police. But I couldn't move, couldn't make my body respond. I gulped air, finally got myself under control and ran from the room.

I was all the way to the garage when I remembered I was still in my stockinged feet and went back for my shoes. Then I was off again, out the door, running for my car. But when I got behind the wheel, my hand was shaking so I could hardly get the key in the ignition.

Take it easy, I told myself. Janet's got to make the call, get her message across. The nearest precinct is a mile away. All I have to do is drive two blocks and lose myself in the boulevard traffic.

But what had seemed so safe before the murder was now full of perils. There might be a squad car cruising nearby. They could get word by radio and catch me before I left the neighborhood. Even when I was on the boulevard, one car among hundreds, my imagination continued to create hazards. What if I had engine trouble, an accident, a flat tire. The way my heart was pounding, I could have an attack. The smallest mishap could prevent my getting back to the auditorium, destroy my alibi.

I drove with extraordinary care, below the posted limit, and stopped at lights that were barely yellow. Although I longed to push the accelerator to the floor, I couldn't risk a ticket. It seemed that hours must have elapsed since I parted from Joe, but when I finally turned into the auditorium's parking area my watch said 9:10.

The lot was unlighted and unattended. I stopped in the corner farthest from the building's side exit and waited. Faint

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sounds of music came from inside. What if I'd misjudged the time? The first half of the program might have been unusually short. Maybe the intermission was already over. Janet knew where I was. If she sent the police to the concert hall, they'd find Joe in my seat and me outside. In that interminable time of waiting, every mistake I might have made, everything that could possibly go wrong, passed through my mind.

Then there was a crescendo of sound as the music rose to a peak, faded out, and was followed by applause. Light flashed as the side door opened to let out the people in urgent need of a cigarette. Some formed in groups, others smoked alone. It was simple for Joe to ease off into the shadows and reach the far side of the car where I was waiting to give him his coat and reclaim my jacket.

"All okay at your end?" he asked.

I nodded. I didn't want to talk about it.

"Nothing to report about the music. Except it was noisy. I stepped hard on an old dame's foot getting to my seat. The one in the flowered hat. She knows you were there all right. And while I was waiting for the show to start I got a Scotch and water from the bar near the front door. Paid for it with a fifty and nearly cleaned out the girl's drawer."

"You did what?" I stared at him, aghast.

"It was a way to make an impression," he said, "and get you one more good witness. Besides, I needed change."

"Why the devil couldn't you stick to your instructions and not go off half—" I cut myself short. What was done was done and I was wasting time. "Did you add any other embellishments, talk to anybody, do anything else to attract attention?"

"Nope. All else was according to plan."

The light over the exit went off and on twice, signaling the end of the intermission. Joe stayed near the edge of the lot, moving swiftly through the dark to the street. He had plenty of time to walk to the terminal and catch an eastbound bus. I strolled casually back to mingle with the smokers and enter the building.

The woman in the seat second from the aisle pulled her feet back and glared at me as I slid past her. Her hat was heavy with cabbage roses. Unquestionably the one stepped on by Joe. I gave her an apologetic smile which she didn't return, then picked up the program Joe had left on the seat and sat down.

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The man on the other side ignored me as usual. I opened the program and stared at the dates of Mozart's birth and death while the musicians reassembled on stage.

I heard hardly more of the second half of the concert than I had of the first. The only thing in the hall of which I was fully aware was Lucille's empty seat. Most of my thoughts were on Juniper Street, trying to visualize what was happening there. Had the police come yet? What were they doing?

As soon as the last chord died away and the applause began, I forced my way past the rose-hatted lady and her companion. No need to stay for encores. A professed non-music lover with an ailing wife would logically be among the first to leave.

Driving home I braced myself for what lay ahead, the role I had to play. The house was a blaze of lights. Two cars were parked in front, a third was in the driveway. Blocked from the garage, I stopped behind one of the cars and walked toward the front porch with what I hoped was a suitable expression of puzzled concern. A man in uniform met me at the door.

"What's happened?" I asked him. "Where's my wife?"

"You Mr. Garrison?"

I nodded.

"Lieutenant!" He moved to the foot of the stairs and called up. "The husband's here. You want him?"

"Keep him there. I'll be right down."

The interview with Lieutenant Thurmond was easier than I feared. He broke the news gently and I reacted with shock, grief, and strong desire for vengeance. He asked for an account of my evening and I told him about the concert. His major interest, I was relieved to find, lay in the fact that, because of my job, I often kept large amounts of cash in the house over weekends.

"I do a lot of collecting on Saturdays," I explained, "when the tenants are at home. And I can't turn the money in until Monday."

"How many people know that?"

"Everyone I work with, of course. And the families I collect from. Plus anybody they tell about it." Purposely I offered him a wide field of suspects.

"And you go to these concerts on Sunday nights. Do people know that, too?"

"It's no secret."

"So somebody could have counted on coming into an empty house with a clear couple of hours to hunt for the

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dough. When he found your wife in the bedroom, he must have panicked."

"I suppose that's how it was," I agreed. "I should have stayed home with Lucille. I shouldn't have let her push me into going to that concert."

"You two get along okay?" The question was overly casual. "No problems?"

"We had our ups and downs." It was better for him to hear it first from me. "The usual arguments."

"I see. Well, I'll be frank with you, Mr. Garrison. We'll have to check out your story. But we know your wife was on the phone a little before half-past eight and that's when the attack came. So if we can confirm that you were in the hall when the concert started, you'll be in the clear."

"You've got to find him," I said vehemently. "Whoever did this to Lucille, he's got to be caught and punished."

For a long time people continued to come and go—police, technical men, some reporters. But at last the body was taken to the morgue, the questions were all asked, and I was alone. I went to bed thinking I was over the highest hurdle. Burglary was firmly established as a motive and the investigation would stay on that track until they finally wrote it off as one more unsolved crime.

The next afternoon, however, Thurmond returned with a changed attitude. Sympathy for a bereaved husband was displaced by harshness toward a prime suspect. The reason quickly became obvious. They'd been probing my financial affairs.

"You've held out on your firm, Garrison," he accused. "The books show you've collected $960 more than you've turned in."

"I'm a little behind," I admitted.

"You're also behind on your mortgage, your taxes, and a few other things."

"The last few months have been tough."

"But the future looks brighter, doesn't it? That ten grand insurance will solve all your problems."

"What are you insinuating?"

"Not a thing. I'm stating a fact. Your wife's death can pull you out of a deep hole. And another fact—her best friends say you had a very bad relationship."

"Even if that's true," I challenged, "what of it? You know when the murder happened and I was miles from here. Or have you been too busy listening to gossip to check on my story?"

"No, we've done that, too.

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The symphony subscription list gave us the names of those who hold the adjoining seats and we've seen them all. The people behind you don't recall whether your seat was occupied. The man on the right says the seat beside him was empty."

"That's Lucille's seat," I said. "I was in the next one."

"Well, neither Mr. nor Mrs. Carlson noticed you. They said they go to hear music, not to socialize."

"What about the women on my left? Haven't you been able to locate them?"

"The Misses Grant. Yes, we talked to them."

"They must remember me. Especially the one with the fancy hat. I accidentally stepped on her foot on the way in."

"She remembers that all right. But she says it happened after they came back from the intermission."

"She's crazy. It was at the beginning, before the concert started. I sat through the whole damn thing. And what about the man in the box office? He has to know I was there early. He still has the ticket I turned in."

"That's right, he does. Also a paper with your name in your own handwriting and a notation of the time you turned it in. That places you in the auditorium at 7:55. And the intermission ended at 9:35. That leaves about an hour and a half unaccounted for, Garrison. And we clocked the round trip from the auditorium at no more than forty-five minutes. So your alibi isn't worth much."

"It is if the Grant woman can get her facts straight. Look, she's old and easily confused. She's mixed up the times. Let me talk to her. I'll make her remember it the way it was."

"How do you figure to do that, Garrison? With a threat or a bribe?"

"All I want her to do is tell the truth."

"The truth is what we're after, too," he said. "But what we've got is a set of witnesses who say maybe you were there, maybe you weren't. They won't swear to it either way."

It can't be happening, I told myself. All my careful plans falling apart because of a bunch of highbrow snobs and an addlepated old woman. I wished Joe had broken her instep. As things stood, he might as well have been invisible. Unless—suddenly I remembered one other thing.

"Wait a minute," I said. "There's somebody else who saw me. The girl who sells drinks. I bought a Scotch and water to kill time before the concert."

"Yeah?" He was skeptical.

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"You think she remembers all her customers?"

"She should me. I gave her a big bill—a fifty. She had a hard time making change."

Thurmond made some notes and went away. I didn't hear from him again till the next morning. On the phone he was noncommittal, simply asked me to come to his office as soon as possible.

I drove downtown in a fever of emotion. Maybe the bargirl had amnesia. Maybe Joe bought the drink too soon, while there was still time for me to reach home before 8:30. Or maybe, by a return of luck, she had told her story and gotten me off the hook.

At headquarters I was taken directly to the lieutenant's office. He motioned me to a chair and looked me up and down with a hard stare I couldn't interpret.

"You got a good break, Garrison," he told me. "We've a statement from the bargirl. She said she usually opens her stand a half hour before the concert. But Sunday she was late, didn't get set up till ten past. So there was a rush of business all at once."

"And she—does she remember me?"

"She remembers having to make change for a fifty. We showed her your picture and she couldn't swear to the face. But she said the guy had on a coat with loud checks. Green and purple."

"That's me." I was nearly babbling with relief. "That's the coat I wore Sunday night. You saw it, too."

"Yes, I saw it."

"Then you know I'm innocent. If I bought a drink from her after 8:10, I couldn't have killed my wife at 8:30."

"That's right, you couldn't." He took something from a drawer and laid it on the desk in front of me. It was a fifty-dollar bill. "That was the only fifty in the girl's box. In fact, she said it's the first time she's taken in anything bigger than a twenty. You recognize it?"

"How can I? All bills look alike."

"This one's a little different. See that corner. It got torn and somebody taped it back together."

I looked closer, saw the jagged place under transparent tape. "It must have been that way when I got it."

"Where did you get it, Garrison?"

"I was out collecting on Saturday. I told you, I take in a lot of cash."

"And appropriate it to your own use?"

"Is that what you're trying

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to pin on me now? Embezzling funds?"

"This is homicide, Garrison, not a case of petty graft. All I want is to make sure that fifty came from you."

"If it's the only one the girl had, it must be mine." I hesitated, stared at the bill. I was too close to safety to let myself be snagged on some technicality. And as I looked at it, the picture of the stack of bills Joe had waved came back to me. There had been, I was sure of it, a taped corner on the outside bill.

"Yes," I said, "come to think of it, there was a patch like that on my fifty."

"Then that ties the last knot." He seemed as pleased as I was by the outcome. "Your alibi is airtight. You can give us a signed statement and we'll get back on the trail of your wife's killer."

He called in a stenographer to take down my account of the events of Sunday evening.

"That's the crucial point," Thurmond prompted me when I told about buying a drink. "Better describe the bill."

So I mentioned the taped corner, sure now that I had seen it in Joe's hand, and finished the story with a sense of being home free. After that there was a short wait for the statement to be typed. I read it through, added my signature, and was ready to leave. The lieutenant came with me.

"Not that elevator," he said, as I turned toward the one that had brought me up. "They're working on it. Better use the one on the south side."

We walked together down the long corridor and rounded a corner to face a bench with two people on it. One was a plump woman with straggly gray hair.

"That's him," she yelled, and was on me in a flash, pounding my chest with her fists. "You devil, you! You killed my Carl."

"All right, Mrs. Harley." The man left the bench and came up behind to pull her off me. "Take it easy, ma'am. You sure this is the man?"

"What's the matter with her?" I backed off, baffled. "She nuts or something?"

Thurmond's attention was on the woman. "Take a good look, Mrs. Harley," he told her. "Can you make positive identification?"

"You think I ever forget that big nose, that dirty blond hair. I saw him hit Carl, smash him with the end of his gun." She fixed her eyes on my face and said quietly, "You didn't have to do that. He'd have let you take the money. You didn't have to kill him."

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"Okay, Bruckner," Thurmond said. "You can take Mrs. Harley home. We have all we need."

"What's going on?" I demanded. "What's she got to do with me?"

"Her husband owned the liquor store by the railroad station—the one you took nine hundred bucks out of on Saturday night. You didn't know she was in the back room, but she got a clear view of you."

"You trying to frame me? I've never been near her liquor store!"

"No? You got an alibi for Saturday, too?"

"I was at home all evening with my wife."

"Unfortunately, she's not here to testify. Look, Garrison, we've got you cold. We know you were in desperate need of money. We have Mrs. Harley's identification and the fifty-dollar bill."

"The fifty—"

"You didn't collect that from a tenant. You took it out of the store's cash register. Mrs. Harley patched it up herself and put it back in the drawer a few minutes before you came in. She even showed us her roll of tape. It matches, Garrison. And that's the bill you used to pay for your drink."

"I didn't. It's all a horrible mistake."

"Maybe you've got a double?" His voice dripped sarcasm.

That's right, I wanted to shout. I've got a double. My brother Joe's the man you're looking for. He has a record, you can look it up. The liquor store robbery was the "luck" he said he'd run into on the way to my place. That's where he got the money he showed off.

Joe killed the old man, not me. How long, I wondered, would it take the police to put it all together, figure out that it was Joe, not me, who bought the drink and sat in my seat at the Sunday concert.

I had, it appeared, a choice of murders. To keep still and let them nail me with Joe's. Or speak up and be convicted of my own.

"Well, Garrison," Thurmond urged, "why not make it easy for yourself and confess?"

I opened my mouth, closed it again. There was nothing I could say.

"Q"

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a *NEW* crime story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

A curious story . . . You might bear in mind that William Bankier, a Canadian, does not tell us the exact locale of this story. According to the author, the story occurs in an unspecified State sometime in the future, and what happens is "an ugly and embarrassing situation for all concerned, instead of the neat, swift dispatching of a human soul that the Law of that State was counting on" . . .

BY THE NECK UNTIL DEAD

by WILLIAM BANKIER

There was not much disagreement among the members of the press corps on that disagreeable morning: the lawyer was a very wicked man indeed and probably deserved to be put away forever.

In fact, on more than one occasion, Connie Hagen, who was covering the execution for Provincial Press and had known Bill Satterfield for years as a friend of his wife, had said to him, "Billy, my boy, I could cheerfully kill you. With my own two hands."

To which he would reply, laughing, "Faith and me old mother used to tell me the same thing." Then he would begin his ritual dance of defending himself, shuffling toward her and away from her, his big woolly head tucked behind one shoulder, sniffing in loud breaths behind his raised fists. And Connie would end up laughing and letting herself be captured against his heavy chest.

One day, of course, as the whole country must know by now, he went too far. Poor Ellen Satterfield, she could attest to that. At least, the gravestone in Baytown cemetery with her name on it was evidence of the danger that lurked not far behind her husband's aggressive playfulness.

Not one person had ever said

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to Connie Hagen that Bill Satterfield was innocent of murder. He was guilty. The jury believed he was and so did Connie. But she had never believed he should be killed for his crime. Which only showed how far out of touch she was with the public majority who had clamored for and obtained the reenactment of capital punishment.

The judge, speaking on behalf of the State which paid his wages, had intoned the almost but not quite forgotten words, "You shall be taken from this place to Oxblood Prison and there, on the 23rd of October, you shall be hanged by the neck until you are dead."

Well, the specified day had arrived. All the possible legal appeals had been exhausted. Millions of words had been written on the subject of the return of the death penalty, printed in magazines and newspapers, read and reread by an excited population. Now Connie Hagen was waiting with the other reporters in the prison yard under a leaden sky, with her feet starting to freeze because her thin-soled shoes were not made for standing on damp flagstones at dawn.

"We'll all be dead before this is over," she said to Roscoe Milligan, the man beside her.

"Cheer up," Roscoe whispered. She could smell his whiskey. "Here he comes now."

And there was the giant figure of Bill Satterfield towering above all the little people walking near him—the guards, the warden, the priest, the executioner. The group moved awkwardly but with a certain degree of precision, like a tableau from a poorly rehearsed amateur play.

The press corps fell silent. They had been talking it up for almost an hour with a pattern of wisecracks, but now they were absolutely silent.

It was going to be a swift procedure. Thank God for that, Connie Hagen thought, and thank God that Billy hasn't looked at me, although he must know I'm here.

They bound his hands behind his back. Why? Well, of course. Otherwise he'd thrash about and try to get at the rope around his neck. They led him up the wooden steps onto the scaffold while the priest, for all Connie could hear inside her screaming head, seemed to be reading aloud from Joe Miller's Joke Book. They adjusted the noose and then they placed a black hood over his face—the big bland expression gone forever.

The noise when the executioner pulled the handle and

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Billy Satterfield dropped through the trap door was a sharp flat report and it echoed back from the stone wall. There followed silence, except for the creaking of the rope as the huge hooded shape swung slowly back and forth, gradually approaching a stationary perpendicular.

Then the familiar, sarcastic voice was heard, slightly muffled by the black cloth but perfectly audible just the same. "Damn it, you stupid guys just can't do anything right."

To say that the spectators were startled would be gross understatement. Not that the executioner was surprised. He had been called upon occasionally in the past to do the job twice when some aspect of his work had lacked perfection—incorrect placement of the knot, for example. But even he, a salty veteran called out of retirement by the new legislation, had never heard a subject's voice flavored with such sarcasm after the fact, so to speak.

In any case, he was halfway up the scaffold steps when Bill Satterfield spoke again. "I can hear somebody coming. If it's the hangman, just let me warn you, I'm not putting up with any more of this."

Still the members of the crowd were too shocked to move, although a murmur of puzzled comment was beginning to develop. Connie Hagen, for one, was swearing quietly to herself, repeating over and over a word the sound of which caused Roscoe Milligan to lower his flask from his lips and raise his eyebrows.

As for the guards, sensing an unseemly rebellion on the part of the undeceased, they too began mounting the wooden steps.

Satterfield's next remarks set the theme for what would happen during the next few days. He said, "I'm not kidding. I know my rights, I'm a qualified member of the bar. The judge's sentence distinctly said I was to be hanged by the neck until dead—hanged *once*, not be dropped through that damned trap door until you killed me. I am now hanging by my neck. But I'm not dead, so until I am you can just keep your murdering hands off me. You have no legal right to hang me twice."

By this time the press corps was reaching a state which would be described in a court of law as uproar. Connie Hagen made herself heard over the babble by dint of screaming, "At least take that rotten hood off his face!"

As one of the guards did so, she wondered for a second if she might not regret her

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request. But Billy's face was revealed as she had often seen it before, a little flushed with anger, but showing no uglier effects of the treatment his windpipe and spinal column had just suffered.

This time he looked straight at her. "Hi, Connie. How about having a press conference? I'd like to make a statement to the world."

Much of the world was waiting, of course, not just for the sunrise but for a first-hand report of the first enactment in a long time of State-sponsored revenge. What they got was a severe scolding from the intended victim who even went so far as to accuse one and all of gross hypocrisy if they tried to hang him again. "You include in your daily prayers," Billy said, "the phrase, 'Thy will be done.' This is clearly His will. Otherwise, why isn't my neck broken? Why am I not strangled?"

In this opinion he was supported by the grim-humored medical man in attendance, who masked his grin with many fake coughs as he told reporters, "That explanation is as good as any. The knot is in the prescribed position. He is wearing no concealed brace. He should have been dead two hours ago."

Two hours was the time it had taken for a mobile TV news crew to arrive, wangle special permission, and set up their camera which now panned from the doctor's exhilarated face to a close-up of Bill Satterfield's neck to reveal no brace of any kind. Just a plain neck with a rope around it.

At noon, reassured by the doctor that the prisoner was not liable now to strangle, and by Satterfield himself that there was no way he would allow the bewildered officials to try again, Connie Hagen went back to the paper to write her story. She accepted a lift with Roscoe Milligan, thus exposing herself to a possible charge of aiding and abetting the crime of drunken driving.

"How long can he keep it up, Roscoe?"

"The doc told me indefinitely. Of course he'll get hungry. I don't suppose he can eat with that rope round his neck."

This very point proved to be the issue which most embarrassed the authorities and tapped the hidden wells of sympathy in the otherwise flinty public spirit. They seemed to have no qualms about—indeed, they had eagerly sought—the killing of this confessed wife-murderer by hanging. But the idea of his dying slowly by starvation at the end of the same rope which was to have snapped the bones

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in his neck like a Thanksgiving wishbone was distasteful to everyone.

So the governor's telephone lines were ready to melt under the heat of the pleading calls. And the radio-station-inspired petition grew to the size of a metropolitan telephone directory as the bandwagon took over. Free Bill Satterfield! Cut Him Down and Let Him Go!

"The hangup is," Satterfield said, getting another of his now frequent laughs from the reporters who were treating the assignment like a sort of World Series story, "my particular hangup is that I can see the State's dilemma. They're afraid to hang me again because I now have public opinion on my side, thanks to all you guys and gals."

"We should thank you, Billy." Connie called from the top row of the bleachers which had been erected hastily that afternoon.

"My pleasure," he said, then paused to blow his nose. They had untied his hands earlier to allow him to perform that mundane self-service. "Then the other half of the State's problem is that they can't very well just turn me loose, can they? I mean, the new law says the penalty for first-degree murder is death. But they tried it and it didn't work in my case. Can they give me life imprisonment? I could argue against that one myself. Set me free? I'd say that's out of the question. Ladies and gentlemen, it seems to me we have a real legal if not to say moral problem on our hands. Or on my neck."

Laughter.

The population proved itself more than ready to take up and argue, if not resolve, this contentious issue and did so with a rare good spirit and boundless enthusiasm. In taverns, bars, and grills, men put their fists into each other's faces and rejoiced at the sight of what the sports writers used to call claret, back in the days when professional boxing was the cornerstone of our culture. Women bit each other savagely in the church basement and other places when the subject of Bill Satterfield was introduced after prayers. While on the nation's campuses, students turned from their daily preoccupation of cursing the Establishment on general principles and, for these few hours, cursed it for its inhumanity to one poor human whose life hung, with poetic coincidence, in the balance.

Satterfield was, of course, well informed about this sensation he was causing. There was plenty of playback to his intelligent mind in the presence

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of network television reporters he might otherwise never have dreamed of meeting. One at a time they mounted the steps he had traversed a long 24 hours previously (for it was now the morning of the second day) and lay prone on the platform with their heads through the trap door. In this position they were practically face to face with the prisoner and conversation was easy. Connie Hagen took her turn at the trap door when the media moguls had finally left.

"What's going to happen, Billy?" She was worried about him again after her initial feelings of relief and exhilaration. Satterfield looked tired. There were dark pouches under his eyes and his smile was forced.

"I don't know."

"Isn't there some legal way out? You must be able to come up with something. You're a lawyer."

"It's because I'm a lawyer that I'm still here. If I weren't, they'd have put me back on the platform and finished the job fast. But I stopped them. I argued a fine point and that's the whole reason this thing is going on. Now the State is confused. They're hesitating because they don't know what to do about me."

"There must be somebody I can appeal to."

"Save your breath, Connie. This event is without precedent. The hanged man is insisting on his rights—to be hanged only once."

She was unwilling to accept his opinion that nothing could be done, but she had no choice. She sighed. "I suppose the authorities will have to decide sooner or later."

"I'm not so sure."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean politicians have always known there is one really sure thing they can do when confronted by a tricky problem. And that is to do nothing. You'd be surprised how often the problem just goes away by itself."

Their eyes met for a moment. It was the way they used to look at each other occasionally when she was over at the Satterfields for drinks of an evening. In those times his eyes said you are a very attractive bachelor girl and I would like to pursue you, but I am a married man and thus not free to act. Now the message was equally clear. And, to Connie Hagen, equally sad.

He went on to say, "If it finally comes to that, I'm going to wish the rope had worked in the first place."

Connie had plenty of time to think about it. She went home first and tried to sleep. She

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blamed the noisy air conditioner for keeping her awake, even though she could barely hear the machine over the clamor of her thoughts.

Then she got dressed and went down to the office where, on the evening of the second day, the glow was beginning to wear off. The party had been going on too long. For how many consecutive hours can people sustain their enthusiasm for one sensational event?

"You look as bad as I feel," Roscoe Milligan slurred from the desk next to hers. "And Connie, my sweet, I hate to say that about a pretty girl like you."

She held out her hand to take the silver flask he offered; it was a gesture he rarely made and until now she had never accepted. The whiskey burned her throat but the feeling was not unpleasant. She took a second drink and then returned the flask.

It was a couple of hours later, in Kelly's Bar downstairs, that the idea occurred to both of them simultaneously, the way most fine, drunken ideas seem to occur. They took a taxi back to the prison where they had no trouble getting into the courtyard. By this time the local news people were, to the guards, even higher on the celebrity scale than the prisoner. Their star power would shine on indefinitely while his was clearly on the wane.

The found Billy alone at the end of his rope. It was early in the morning of the third day and the bleachers were empty. Only one guard was on duty, and he was bored to the point where sleep sprawled on him like a heavyweight wrestler, seconds away from the fall that would end the match. He raised his cap from his face, grinned sheepishly at the familiar faces of the pretty reporter and her gawky companion, then covered his face again.

Connie and Roscoe walked quietly to the scaffold. Bill Satterfield appeared to be asleep. His head was on his chest, his eyes closed. For a moment Connie dared to hope that God had decided to call off this macabre joke. But no. The slow, regular flutter of the open shirt collar showed that the man was still alive.

There was no need to prompt Milligan. He was already at the side of the now sleeping guard, easing the pistol from its holster. He walked quietly with it to Connie's side and raised his eyebrows.

"Let me do it, Roscoe." When he retained the gun, she extended her open hand and presented her clinching argument. "I'm wearing gloves."

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Billy woke up just before she shot him. Or else, she told herself later, he had not been sleeping at all. There were the beautiful eyes, looking directly into hers, welcoming the bullet she was about to direct at him, trying to make it easy for her.

"Thanks, Connie. See you later."

The noise of the shot woke the guard, scaring the poor man half to death. The reporters calmed him down, gave him back his gun, told him what to say.

And so it all worked out best for everybody. The legislators were off the hook after three very uneasy days. The news media had another good headline: *Murderer Shot While Trying to Escape.* The guard was a hero for a while.

Best of all, to Connie Hagen's way of thinking, poor Billy was well out of this world where he was never going to make it anyway. And who knows, she consoled herself, maybe he's settled into the next one. After all, he was a very wise man and he distinctly said he would see her later.

"Q"

NEXT MONTH...

14 stories — 12 NEW

EDWARD D. HOCH *(about Nick Velvet)*

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a NEW Gideon story by

J. J. MARRIC (John Creasey)

first publication in the United States

Continuing the new series about Commander George Gideon, Chief of the C.I.D. (the Criminal Investigation Department at New Scotland Yard). . .Tec tintype of Gideon: "Few would have expected such sensitivity in this big powerful man with the rugged face, the iron-gray hair brushed back from a deeply lined forehead, the unrelenting set of mouth and chin". . .

GIDEON AND THE EAST END GANG

by J. J. MARRIC (John Creasey)

"The truth is, Mr. Gideon, I'm worried sick that my boy will go to the bad—as he surely will if he keeps on with the company he's mixing with. I don't know anyone who might help, except you. Will you try, sir?"

George Gideon, Commander of the Criminal Investigation Department at New Scotland Yard, looked across his office desk at the woman who spoke. She was in her early forties, attractive, with fine gray eyes, shadowed by unmistakable marks of anxiety. Her work-worn hands played nervously with the gloves in her lap.

Gideon said, "Yes, I'll try, Mrs. Blake," and at her pitiful expression of renewed hope, fear chilled his heart. Even as he said "Yes," he thought: But how? He was not sure there was a way; he had been led, by his compassion, into making a promise he might not be able to keep. Few would have expected such sensitivity in this big powerful man with the rugged face, the iron-gray hair brushed straight back from a deeply lined forehead, the unrelenting set of mouth and chin.

Faith, reborn of Gideon's

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promise, made the woman's face beautiful.

"Oh, bless you!" she cried. "Bless you! I knew you would. My husband used to say, if I was really in trouble the man I must go to was George Gideon." Half smiling, her lips tremulous, she went on, "As if he wasn't in trouble enough, Mr. Gideon, with ten years of prison to come, and that awful sickness eating away at him, although he didn't know it until the last."

"It was hard," Gideon said gruffly, and this time he thought it was better for her that her husband had died in the prison hospital.

Naomi Blake had suffered more than enough from an incompetent husband who had lived a life of petty thievery. When the law finally caught up with him she had been left with her son, Lance. Now it seemed that the boy was in danger of being drawn into a life of crime as futile as that of his father.

"I'll have to know everything," Gideon said warningly.

"Oh, I'll tell you, don't worry about that. I won't hide anything from you."

But how much had her son hidden from her? Gideon wondered. In all likelihood he had told her little. And as she told Gideon all she knew, he made notes—notes on Lance's late nights, the group of wild teen-agers he mixed with, the bowling alley, the betting, the beer. It seemed a straightforward story, cut to pattern, and the mother was right; the next step would probably be minor crime, Borstal, and a man at odds with a society to which he would bear an eternal grudge.

Her eyes misted with tears as she finished the short inglorious narrative.

"There isn't much hope for him, is there, Mr. Gideon? Not when you see it all together like this. Half the people I know have sons who've gone wrong, and they all started the way Lance is behaving now."

Gideon stood up. He looked massive, almost forbidding.

"They only go wrong if there's bad in them, Mrs. Blake. If it's in Lance, you're going to have to face up to it. I can help you find out whether it is or not." That way, she was at least prepared for what might be inevitable. "Have you a good photograph of him?"

"Oh, yes, I forgot." She took a plastic holder out of her handbag, opened it, and handed it to Gideon. He saw a narrow, unexpectedly aquiline face, with clear-cut features, his mother's fine eyes, and arrogance in the expression of the lips.

"Nice-looking boy," he remarked.

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"I don't know where he gets his looks from—it certainly isn't from his father or me," Naomi Blake said, in a futile attempt at gaiety.

Gideon sent for a messenger to show her out of the Yard, and she left him, voicing her gratitude and hopefulness. Gideon had the impression that she felt she had now done all she could, and that the rest was up to Fate, God, and Gideon—Gideon predominating. He shivered.

When she had gone, he telephoned Tenby, the Superintendent of N.E. Division, in whose area the Blakes lived, and asked for a watch to be kept on the boy. He gave no reason; if Gideon wanted something done no one asked him why.

Then he turned to the more urgent problems of his job. But it was a long time before he could rid himself of his mind's-eye picture of the kindly commonplace woman and the arresting face of her son.

Lance Blake stood out among the half-dozen youths gathered in the café at the High Spot Bowling Alley, as decisively as his name stood out among the Bills, Berts, Bobs, and Jacks. He was not particularly tall, but about his lean figure clung a curious individuality. All the boys were standing in a close group, the noise of the bowling and the chatter of a heedless crowd of casual onlookers making it impossible for them to be overheard. One youth, Bill Carson, was big, powerful, unshaved, dominating; his hair was longer than his comrades'.

"Do it my way and it can't go wrong," he said. "Be worth five hundred nicker for each of us—we can't miss." He stared his companions down with hard unrelenting eyes, as if he dared any of them to contradict him. "I know just the man to buy the stuff from us."

"Who?" Lance Blake asked.

"The less you know, the less to worry about, young fellow-me-lad. Do you want five hundred quid or don't you?"

"Believe me, I want it," Lance said fervently.

There was the usual chorus of "Who wouldn't?" and "It's easy money."

"All set, then," said Bill Carson. "Eleven thirty tomorrow night at Kirk Street. Jack, you and Bert will have the getaway car. Tom, you'll have the motorbike to cause a distraction. Bob, you and me will blow the safe. Lance boy, you'll get in and open the place up for us. Okay?"

"Okay, okay, okay," they all echoed.

The following night was fine,

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clear, but moonless—the devil's luck; their plan would be easier to conceal in darkness. They moved toward their objective with precision, carrying the tools they needed, Carson himself responsible for the dynamite. This objective was a small post office in one of Chelsea's narrow Georgian streets, close to the river.

There were occasional traffic noises—it was still early for the West End—as well as the stir and activity of river craft. Lance and Bill Carson moved on rubber-soled shoes toward a window at the back of the post office, which was to be forced or broken open. Car and motorcycle were waiting at strategic points.

Lance, balancing precariously, was about to haul himself through this window when a furious blowing on the auto horn brought the urgency of alarm. Engines slowed or started up, men shouted, a police whistle cut shrilly through the night air.

Carson turned and ran. Lance dropped heavily to the ground. Before he could pick himself up, two policemen were standing over him.

At his Fulham home, Gideon, informed by telephone of the happening at Kirk Street, gave his wife a resigned goodbye kiss and drove hurriedly to the Yard. Superintendent Tenby of N.E. Division was conferring with Chief Inspector Forbes of Chelsea, as Gideon, somewhat aggressively, strode in.

"Come into my office," he said shortly.

Chief Inspector Forbes was a man in his fifties, tall, balding, thin, and donnish. Superintendent Tenby, a younger, plumper man, was very different, with something of the joviality of a successful farmer.

"Sit down. Now—" Gideon paused for an instant. "What's been happening at Chelsea?"

"There were six of them," Forbes explained. "Tenby detailed a man to follow young Blake, and he soon saw the way things were. The fight was over in a few minutes—all they'd done was break a window."

"Anyone hurt?" inquired Gideon.

"A few grazed knuckles, that's all."

Gideon turned to Superintendent Tenby.

"What do you know about them?" he demanded.

"The leader is an ex-Borstal boy named Carson," said Tenby. "The rest are young fools looking for easy money."

"Including Lance Blake?" Gideon asked.

"Yes. In a way."

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"Be more explicit," urged Gideon. "And remember, we haven't got unlimited time."

"Right!" Tenby smiled, taking no offense. "We've been watching young Blake for five nights. He doesn't fit into the pattern. He meets the gang in the afternoons and very late at night, but never evenings."

"Well?"

"He spends every evening with a girl who lives in Hampstead," went on Tenby. "She comes from a well-thought-of family, works as a demonstrator of a popular cake mix, and earns a good salary. Name's Dale—Betty Dale. Blake's been going out with her for three months."

Gideon asked softly, "Spending money on her?"

"Not that much."

"Does he ever spend the night with her?"

"No, sir," Tenby said. "She's the virtuous type. And she wears a bright new engagement ring. Know what it looks like?"

"I know what it looks like," Gideon agreed, "but we've got to find out what it *really* is. I think I'll see this girl in the morning."

Neither man asked why Gideon was so interested.

The next morning, at eight thirty, he rang the bell of a small flat in an old house in Hampstead, near Swiss Cottage. An attractive brunette, not yet made-up, and wearing a flowered housecoat, opened the door. She was startled, and alarmed when Gideon showed her first his card and then Lance Blake's photograph.

"I'll have to go to work soon," she said, "but you'd better come in." Gideon noticed that the flat was pleasantly furnished and spotlessly clean. "What's happened? What has Lance done?"

"Will you answer one or two questions first?" asked Gideon. "How long have you known him?"

"About nine months."

"Do you know his parents?"

"His father's dead—he used to be a bank manager. His mother lives in the country."

"I see," said Gideon, and thought: So he's ashamed of a burglar father. "Are you engaged to him?"

For a moment worry faded from her eyes.

"Yes. We're to be married next month. We—we've seen a darling little bungalow where—" She caught her breath. "But what's he done? Please tell me."

"One more question," Gideon said. "Who is to pay for the bungalow?"

"We are, between us. There's a five-hundred-pounds deposit, and the mortgage to be spread over fifteen years. Lance

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doesn't want me to work after we're married, but I've made him promise that I can for a while."

"Have you got five hundred pounds?" asked Gideon quietly.

"I've got two hundred, Lance has the rest."

After a long thoughtful pause Gideon said, "He hasn't, Miss Dale, but he tried desperately to get it. He must be so much in love with you that he couldn't tell you the truth about himself. Sit down, my dear, never mind about being late for once."

Slowly, gently, he told her of Lance's background, of his mother, of the East End gang, of the kind of friends with whom the boy had become involved. Then he added, "He must have felt that the only way he could win you was by pretending to be what he wasn't, by impressing you with money he didn't have. He's never been in any kind of trouble before, and at the magistrate's court this morning he'll probably be bound over. What will you do, Miss Dale?"

"I must go and see him," she said, almost before the question was finished. "I can't let him go through this alone."

Gideon's heart, so often heavy, was gladdened.

Mrs. Blake was in court, sitting next to Betty Dale. When Lance stood in the dock with the other youths, he looked pale, haughty, hostile. Then he caught sight of his mother and Betty.

For an instant Lance gazed defiantly back at them; then he saw his mother's smile, Betty's generous wave. The hard shell of hostility and assumed arrogance broke and fell away, leaving only fright, and the will never to stand awaiting sentence again.

"And they're still going to get married. They're moving into a small flat in Finchley Road first, and they're both going to work. I've never seen Lance so happy. He couldn't be like that if he were really bad, could he, Mr. Gideon? I know he's had a lot of hard luck—"

"Hard luck?" interrupted Gideon. "With you his mother and Betty his wife, he's got more good luck than most men ever get. He wasn't born bad—he saw things the wrong way round, that's all. He wanted Betty desperately and this was the only way he could see of getting her. If he were my son, Mrs. Blake, I wouldn't worry about him any more."

"But if I hadn't come to you I *would* be worrying," said Naomi Blake.

Gideon didn't deny it.

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a NEW Van der Valk story by

NICOLAS FREELING

Continuing the new series of vignettes about the Amsterdam detective, Van der Valk . . . The Cavalier had been in five different prisons and had escaped from all five. Van der Valk had his own method of dealing with freedom . . .

VAN DER VALK AND THE CAVALIER

by NICOLAS FREELING

"Ever worked as a war correspondent?"

"Sure. I was in Cyprus for a year."

"Ever hear bullets go past your ear and told yourself if they were fifty centimeters lower, it would have meant one less journalist?"

"Yes."

"All right, I let you come with me. Just don't scream or faint—this one's the original fast draw, and he has nothing, but nothing, to lose. He was in for life—he's forty now. Into the car, then."

There were two men in the back; Van der Valk drove, the journalist beside him.

"How many men do you take?"

"There are only the three of us. We don't have that many men fit to tackle the Cavalier. Besides, he always keeps to crowds. I could take twenty, have bullets flying all over the place, kill six bystanders, and still see him get away. When not strong, be crafty."

"Why is he called the Cavalier?" The journalist scented the "picturesque."

"*Cavale* means escape. In his career he's broken out five times from five different prisons. They don't come any better."

"You almost sound as though you like him."

"I do. Don't misunderstand—I hate his guts. He's incorrigible. He got life for

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killing a policeman with a knife."

"How d'you know he's here—I mean, where you're going?"

"Informer—who gets money, a pat on the back, and a soft let-down—while the Cavalier goes into the deepest dungeon in chains, which is what is called justice, but don't quote me."

"I see what you mean," the journalist said soberly.

Van der Valk tossed the cigarette out of the window and spat a shred of tobacco from his lip. They were out of the town now, on a dark country road. Dimly ahead, the lights of a village began to show. A gaudily lit filling station, a straggling line of houses with a factory chimney looming behind, a hotel café for expense-account salesmen, and a diner for the rank-and-file truck drivers.

"He's been told," said Van der Valk acidly, "that you want to interview him. An English daily paper!—that'll bring him all right. Train robbers and such—he'll be mustard-keen to show he's just as tough a monkey as anyone you've ever seen." They stopped by the garage. "Now—for a few minutes you're on your own. Go on into the café, sit at a table alone, and I'm sure he'll come to join you. Just say, in English, 'Two beers, I'm waiting for a friend'—then you get your interview. Forget about us."

The journalist swallowed, looked round at the two plain-clothes traveling salesmen sitting there, and was stung by their faint grins.

"I suppose it's fair."

"You get an interview, and an eyewitness account. We get an arrest. Here's five hundred pounds in our currency—to pay him for the interview."

"Two beers. My friend will be along later." He hoped that was right; he had forgotten the exact wording.

He found his notebook and a ballpoint, placed them on the table with the bulging money envelope underneath. He had to keep swallowing and sipped gratefully at the beer. The low room was full of noise and cigarette smoke. Truck drivers were choosing which keys to press in the jukebox; four oafish youths were busy with pinball machines, which rang out rhythmically and lit up pink and green numbers.

Three solitary men like himself were scribbling in books, totting up the day's total of encyclopedias sold to housewives, opinion forms filled out on the most popular brand of detergent and how much margarine the average

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family bought in a week. Two Algerian rug peddlers, their stock slung over the chair between them, were eating peanuts and dropping the shells on the floor.

The journalist started scribbling too for something to do—background details—and started when the hand picked up the other beer. The Cavalier was dressed like a mechanic in overalls, with long greasy hair and blackened nails. He had a cheap look, with a hairline mustache and a sallow dirty face.

"This table is only for you and me—right?" A soft voice. "If it isn't you go home in a basket." The journalist slid the envelope across. An agile thumb held the lip open long enough for a quick glance.

"Fair enough. How did you get the word to me?"

"Never underestimate the press. You have friends—and I have money."

"I don't," the Cavalier said dryly. "That's why I'm here. This is just a down payment—what do you offer for an exclusive story?"

"Fifty thousand in your money. We call it 'The Cavalier'—and we run it as a serial, one installment for each prison break you've made."

"Five parts," he said with acrid humor, "and you make me the hero. I've never robbed a train, but I've robbed more banks than you've had hot cups of tea. I'll be in Spain next week—a millionaire! Cheers."

"Cheers," said Van der Valk's voice just behind the chair. "Stay sitting." Two of the opinion-poll men were sauntering across.

"Johnny, I hardly knew you!" said Van der Valk. The long greasy hair came off in his hand; underneath was gray-brown, cut short. The elbows were held pinned, which did not stop the Cavalier from spitting in the journalist's face.

"No, no, Johnny. I set it up," said Van der Valk. "He was the bait and never knew it."

And a minute afterward they were again sitting in the auto, the Cavalier between the two plain clothesmen in the back.

"Tell the skunk," said a soft voice, "to look forward to a grenade through his window."

"Why, yes, Johnny, I think you would." They were on the dark road again, between trees.

"Stop the car," said the Cavalier.

"You want to breathe the night air—tell yourself you're free?"

"I want to stand up against a tree" was the sullen reply.

"All right." The man got out, expressionless Van der

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Valk accompanied him, the Cavalier's hands cuffed in front, to the shadows. The motor kept running and nothing else was heard for three minutes. Then two shots came, close together, and a third after a pause of ten seconds. In the back the two plain clothesmen were wooden. The journalist jumped out.

"You've shot him!"

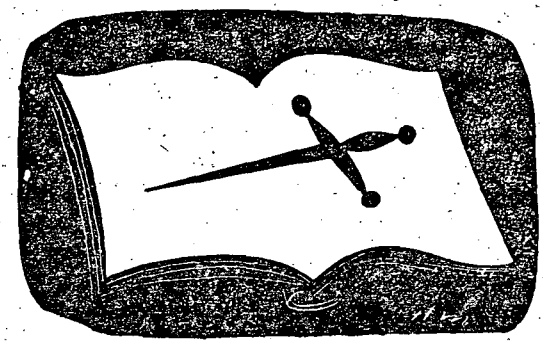
"You won't print it—unless you say he was escaping," said Van der Valk. "Come to that, he was."

"You shot him!"

"Yes. I let him enjoy liberty, and then I shot him. I told him I would. You think he's ungrateful?"

"But in cold blood—"

"He's been in prison almost since he was born—and he had a long way still to go. Think of it a while, then tell me what you'd have preferred. Think of it—print it if you want. I don't think you will, though—not after you've thought it out carefully."



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Morgan would be finished with the caper and gone before anything could go wrong . . .

NOTHING TO CHANCE

by R. L. STEVENS

The man in the smoking jacket held up his drink for a toast. "To your success, Mr. Furnas."

Harry Furnas, an American who found himself increasingly uncomfortable in the presence of wealthy educated Englishmen, simply nodded and raised his glass. He was anxious to collect his money and be out of there. "I gotta be going. Lots to do."

"You won't fail me?"

"He'll be dead before Sunday," Furnas replied with confidence. "What about the rest of my money?"

"I'll meet you back here Monday evening. We'll settle up then."

Furnas passed his tongue over dry lips. Cybil had been hounding him for money, and now in another week they'd have plenty "I plan these things carefully," he said. "I leave nothing to chance. Are there any dogs on the estate?"

"Dogs? No. Why do you ask?"

"You can't use a silencer on a high-powered rifle. But if I get in fairly close I can use a regular hunting rifle equipped with a Jarrett Noise Reducer, a type of silencer that alters the sound of a shot to a range beyond human hearing. But sometimes dogs can hear it and they set up a terrible howl. If the place has dogs I gotta stay farther away and use a high-powered job."

"There are no dogs," the Englishman assured him.

"Good," Furnas said. "I'll see you back here on Monday."

Sara Compton rolled over on the bed and gazed into his deep blue eyes. "How old are you, Morgan?"

The question startled him. "Older than I act, but younger than I look."

"No, really! If I'm to take you home for the weekend to meet Mommy and Daddy, I really must know. You might be old enough to be my father!"

Morgan snorted and stood

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up. "You're twenty-one. You can marry whom you please."

"Morgan!"

"I'm just thirty-five," he confessed, shading a few years from the truth.

"That's not so bad, then. Daddy is ten years older than Mommy, so he can't object too much."

"I'm anxious to meet them," Morgan said, and meant it. A meeting with George Compton in his home was the reason he'd been romancing Compton's daughter these past six weeks.

"I can't believe we've known each other such a short time," she said, getting out of the bed and starting to brush her hair. "It seems you've always been here."

"I wish I had been."

"Everything's moved so fast."

"It could be faster. Let's drive up and surprise your family tomorrow, instead of waiting till Friday."

Sara got back on the bed and sat cross-legged while she thought about it. Finally she said, "Why not? It's a splendid idea!"

In the morning, leaving London behind to drive west along the highway to Bristol, Morgan felt good. The caper was progressing well up to this point, and he saw no real complications ahead. Sara Compton wasn't likely to die of a broken heart when she discovered her lover was nothing more than a swindler and a thief. She was young enough, and pretty enough, to have someone else before his plane reached New York.

Driving the unfamiliar British car with its right-hand steering, he concentrated on the road ahead, leaving Sara to comment on the passing scene. "I'd forgotten there were still so many cows in the west country," she said. "I keep thinking it will all be houses one of these days."

"Do we turn off soon?"

"Just this side of Bath. I'll show you where."

They took the turn she indicated and followed a narrow lane for some distance. Finally she said, "This is it."

Morgan drove through the open gates and up the long curving driveway to the sprawling manor house. Yes, he decided, this is it.

From a wooded hill overlooking the Compton estate, Harry Furnas watched the arrival of this latest car. He hadn't bargained on quite so many people. Sorting out the proper target and doing the job before Sunday might be more difficult than he'd planned.

He chewed on a fresh stick

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of gum and considered the problem. If there were no dogs present and he could get close enough to use the silencer, it shouldn't be too difficult to identify the man he'd been hired to kill. But with the high-powered rifle and telescopic sight, identification could be more tricky with only a single snapshot to go by.

After a time he strolled down the far side of the hill to the car where Cybil waited.

George Compton was a blustery man in his fifties who studied Morgan from beneath drooping lids that sheltered searching brown eyes. He took a thick Havana cigar from his mouth and asked, "What did you say your business was, Mr. Morgan?"

"Plastics. I'm an engineer with Plasticide Industries."

"A good firm," Compton conceded. But he was obviously unhappy with Morgan, as was his wife, a graying lady well into middle age. "Frankly, though, we never expected our Sara to come home with someone so much older than herself."

"I'm just thirty-five."

"You seem older," Mrs. Compton said. "Have you been married before?"

"Yes," he admitted. It seemed the right answer.

George Compton took over the questioning again. "Sara is only twenty-one. Just what are your intentions?"

"We plan to be married, Daddy," Sara said, interrupting before Morgan could reply. "With or without your approval."

Once more George Compton removed the cigar from his mouth. He turned to Morgan and said, "I think we should discuss this in private. Will you accompany me to the study?"

"Certainly, sir."

The room was large and lined with books, in the best British tradition. Morgan selected a comfortable chair and waited for Sara's father to begin. Compton poured some wine into two glasses and passed one across the table. "We're both old enough to know what goes in this world, Mr. Morgan. What are you after—money?"

"No, sir. I happen to love your daughter."

George Compton sighed. "Do you know what my business is?"

"Compton Computers?"

"Correct. I have no sons, and someday Sara will inherit that very profitable operation. Near here is an old limestone mine in which are stored thousands of computer tapes from banks and industries. The mine is

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bombproof and theftproof, yet any of my clients has access to his tapes through a standard computer terminal linked to the mine by a telephone line. I'm paid a handsome monthly rental for the service."

Compton leaned back in his chair. "If you're serious about my daughter you should know that I would never consent to her marriage until I'd made a thorough investigation of your background. I do not intend that Compton Computer Service fall into the hands of a fortune hunter."

"I understand perfectly," Morgan said, unruffled, knowing he'd have finished the caper and be gone before any report on him could reach Compton.

They were interrupted by the opening of the study door, and a tall dark-haired man entered. Though he was much younger than George Compton, it seemed obvious they were related. "Sorry to interrupt, George, but the ladies are growing restless."

Compton got to his feet. "My brother Roderick—this is Sara's friend, Michael Morgan."

Roderick Compton shook hands. "Pleasure to meet you. Sara has just been entertaining us with the story of how you met in the London Underground."

They left the study and joined Sara and her mother. Toward evening another visitor arrived for the weekend. His name was Lord Bellows and he drove up in a mud-splattered station wagon with a brace of hunting dogs in the back.

"Are you allowing dogs in the house?" Roderick sputtered to his brother.

"I'll keep 'em outside," Lord Bellows said. Watching him strut through the high-ceilinged living room in his muddy hunting boots, Morgan could only smile.

Cybil turned from the phone, holding it out to Harry Furnas. "It's for you. I thought no one knew we were here."

"No one does, except the man who hired me. Something must be wrong."

He accepted the phone and spoke a few quick words. The voice on the other end, which he recognized from their single meeting, said, "There's trouble here. One of the weekend guests brought two hunting dogs."

"Damn! That rules out my silencer!"

"Use the high-powered rifle."

"I never saw him, remember? I just have that snapshot you gave me, and it's not a very good one. What if I kill the wrong person?"

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"All right. If I set him up, get him outside at a certain time, can you do the job?"

"Sure."

"You know the west windows, overlooking the sloping lawn?"

"Yes."

"He'll come out of there at exactly four o'clock tomorrow afternoon. Got that?"

"Don't worry."

"You won't miss?"

"I never have yet."

Harry hung up and leaned back on the bed. "You better hope that phone wasn't tapped," Cybil said.

"We didn't mention any names. And besides, nobody would dare tap George Compton's phone."

"Is he the one you've been hired to kill?"

He ignored her, stood up, and walked to the window. "Come on," he said finally. "Let's get something to eat."

Morgan heard someone call his name and turned to see Sara hurrying along the hallway. "I was looking for you," he said.

"Daddy spoke to you about his business?"

"Yes, at some length. We had a nice chat."

"I hope you weren't offended. He's so concerned that someone might marry me just to get control of the business."

"I'd never do that," Morgan assured her. His objectives were of a more short-range nature. Why waste years on something that could be accomplished in a single weekend? And why marry a girl like Sara when he had someone far better waiting for him back in New York?

They went in to dinner together. George Compton sat at the head of the table, flanked by his wife and Sara, with Morgan and Roderick next to them. Lord Bellows arrived late, while the main course was being served. "Had to see to my dogs," he explained. "They're not used to such shabby quarters."

"It's the best we could do," Mrs. Compton sniffed. "We keep no pets ourselves, you know."

Later, over dessert, Morgan said casually, "I've been thinking about your company, Mr. Compton. My firm might be able to use your services."

Compton perked up a bit. "I thought you were in plastics."

"I am. But we're thinking of transferring our research data to tape." As he warmed to the subject he saw Lord Bellows eying him suspiciously from across the table.

After dinner, while the others sipped brandy in the library, Bellows stopped him in the hall. "Morgan, isn't it?

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Come from America to marry the daughter?"

"That's my intention, sir."

Lord Bellows sniffed. "The old man suspects you. Lots of people would like to marry a girl as rich as Sara Compton. You after the money?"

"I'm after Sara. I happen to love her."

"Good luck," Bellows said with a trace of irony.

As the man walked away, Morgan took a deep breath. He had to accomplish his business and be on his way back to London. There were too many suspicious people in the household.

It was Saturday morning, while strolling alone around the estate, that Morgan saw the sudden reflection of sunlight on the hillside. He went out the side gate, careful to shield himself behind a hedge, and climbed quickly to a spot opposite the reflection's origin. He'd suspected a police officer with binoculars, but when he was near enough he saw something else entirely. A man about his own age was assembling a high-powered rifle, complete with telescopic sight that occasionally caught the morning sun.

Morgan knew enough about weapons to realize the man was hardly a police officer. More likely he was a hired killer, paid to take a shot at someone in the Compton household. He watched for a time, fascinated, and then moved silently back down the hill. He knew he could report his discovery at once to George Compton and perhaps cement his place in the household—but that would only bring the police, something to be avoided at any cost, at least for the present.

He decided to do nothing. Whatever the man on the hillside did could only play into Morgan's hands. If a shot was fired and someone killed or wounded, it would even provide the distraction he needed to get at George Compton's files. True, the police would come then, but they'd be busy searching for a sniper and not a thief.

The Compton files were the key to his scheme, the reason he'd been romancing Sara for all these weeks to gain access to her father's house. In the files would be listed the clients of Compton Computer Service together with their identification numbers and code words. With this information Morgan would return to London on Sunday, to a computer terminal he'd rented for the purpose, and tie in to the tapes of London's largest bank.

It would then be a simple matter to alter those tapes to add his name to a list of divi-

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dend payments to be mailed by the bank in two weeks' time. Before anyone realized what happened, or how, he would have received and cashed 50,000 pounds' worth of perfectly good checks drawn on perfectly good companies.

So he said nothing about the man on the hillside, but he thought a good deal about him. Ruling out Sara and Mrs. Compton, there were only three possible targets for that high-powered rifle—George Compton, his brother Roderick, and Lord Bellows. The latter had been an unexpected arrival, dropping in at the conclusion of a nearby hunting trip, and thus could be ruled out as the intended victim of a crime that had been carefully planned in advance. The brothers Compton were different. Both could have been expected to spend the weekend at the house.

These thoughts were still with him at lunch, watching the brothers as they chatted and bantered across the table. One of them, he felt certain, was the intended target. And Morgan was going to let that one be shot.

As the afternoon dragged on, Morgan glanced out the window occasionally, trying to spot the position of the waiting gunman. But the sun had shifted now and there was no telltale reflection from the hill. Perhaps the rifleman had left. Perhaps he had only been a hunter resting there for a quick cigarette.

Finally, a little before four o'clock, George Compton intercepted him in the hall. "I'm interested in hearing more about Plasticide. Shall we talk now?"

It was the opportunity Morgan had been waiting for. "Certainly, sir. In the study?"

Compton led the way and closed the door behind them. "The more I see of you, Morgan, the more I like you. I don't mind admitting I had misgivings at first, but they're pretty much a thing of the past now. But let's get down to business now."

Morgan turned on his most charming smile. "I know my firm would be most interested in your system for information retrieval. What prevents anyone from tying into their tape storage?"

"That's simply enough answered," Compton said, unlocking his desk and removing a thick leather-bound notebook. "In here are the identification numbers and code words for all my clients."

"Could I see it?"

Sara's father hesitated. Then he came around the desk and opened the notebook for Morgan . . .

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Harry Furnas shifted his cramped legs and glanced at his watch. He'd been on the hill since early morning, fearing that a later arrival might have been noticed. Now, as four o'clock approached, he shifted the weapon once more and squinted through the sight.

There were the west windows, opening outward like doors. He took his eye away and glanced at the snapshot once more, just to be certain. Then he looked at his watch.

It was one minute to four.

Morgan needed only a glance at the bank's page to memorize both number and code word. *7876541 tuckerbag.* That would do it. He closed the book and passed it back to George Compton. The older man was just returning it to his desk when suddenly his head jerked up. "My God, what was that? A shot?"

"I didn't hear anything," Morgan said.

"It was a shot. Is that damn fool Bellows hunting this close to the house?" He hurried to the doors facing the west lawn and threw them open. "Go out and take a look around, will you, Morgan?"

"Sure. Glad to. But I didn't hear anything."

He stepped outside, shielding his eyes against the afternoon sun. Too late he saw the flash of the high-powered rifle on the hillside. Too late he realized what was happening.

Morgan felt the impact of the bullet spin him around and then he died before the sound of the shot could reach his ears.

It was some hours later when Roderick found his brother George alone in the study. "You did that," he said. "You had him killed, didn't you?"

George Compton stood in his smoking jacket, holding a glass of wine up for a toast. "When Sara sent me his snapshot a few weeks ago and told me he was coming home with her this weekend, I naturally had him checked out. He proved to be a notorious American swindler. Hardly the sort I could allow my daughter to marry."

"Why didn't you simply tell her about him?"

"I considered that," George Compton said. "But what if she wouldn't have listened? What if she'd gone off and married him anyway? No, this way was better. It left nothing to chance."

"Q"

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a *NEW* detective story by

JOHN PIERCE

Lucille Truett bought a new car. Klopton Motor Sales didn't have the color she wanted, so the right model and color were ordered. Miss Truett had to wait more than a month, but finally the new car arrived and she took delivery and drove the car home and the next morning discovered that she had got more than she'd paid for—which doesn't happen often these days, except that Miss Truett would gladly have settled for the original deal, with no free options . . . "Straight" detection—if detection is ever straight . . .

ONE SOCK INSIDE OUT

by JOHN PIERCE

The car was a new blue Python in the $4,200 class, one day off the dealer's lot. Two men in uniform stood behind it in the carport of a red-brick bungalow in the Shady Layne Manor part of town. I moseyed around the Python. It had whitewalls, air conditioning, 31.3 miles on the odometer, a decal that read *Klopton Motor Sales*, and a dead man curled in the trunk compartment.

The dead man looked nice and peaceful and stiff. Stiffening, he had strained against the trunk's confines until his calm face was arched up by the spare tire. He was, said his credentials, David R. Brackney, of 234 Claremont Drive. He wore an expensive suit, $50 shoes, and had one of his two socks on inside out. I left the officers with him and rang the chime beneath a card reading *Lucille Truett, R.N.*

A robust, earthy woman of 50 in her white nursing rig let me in. She had an upbeat husky voice and enough time at her trade so that the finding of a dead body did not appear to have unraveled her. She had, she had told the officers,

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bought the car from Klopton Motors yesterday evening, driven it home, parked it for the night in her carport, and this morning she had opened the trunk compartment and found the body.

"Klopton Motors," I said. "Didn't it used to be called something else?"

"It was Mooney and Klopton, or vice versa, until late last year. I think Klopton bought Mooney out. Coffee, Lieutenant Hood? Or do I say, 'Detective'?"

I needed the coffee. It was nine and I hadn't had breakfast. She went to the kitchen and returned. "Nice trick on a hard-working spinster, eh? A brand-new car with a corpse in it. That's the only option I've ever gotten without paying for it and it doesn't work. His name's Brackney, isn't it?"

I sat down with the coffee. "You knew him?"

"Not really knew him, but the minute I opened that trunk an hour ago I was sure I'd seen him somewhere before. It bugged me silly for a while. Now I know."

"Yes?"

"At the hospital—Chambers General—about six months ago. He used to come calling. I remembered him by the beautiful clothes and the gorgeous flowers he'd bring in."

"Flowers?"

"Great twenty-dollar armfuls of them."

"You mean he was visiting a patient."

"Yeah, that's all. He came and went for a week or two. Lovely manners, quite classy, and now . . .? Who else is he?"

"David R. Brackney, age forty-one, works for Youngblood Clothiers, lives on Claremont Drive."

"Claremont. That's *way* across town."

"You say you bought this car yesterday."

"Well, I accepted delivery yesterday. Actually I ordered it over a month ago."

"Start back then if you will, Miss Truett."

"Routine stuff. I knew what I wanted and dropped in on Klopton. His trade-in offer was okay but they didn't have my color, so I ordered it. Called them last week, it was due any day now, so I started watching as I'd drive past coming from work. Tuesday evening—that's the day before yesterday—I saw these two carry-alls unloading about a dozen Pythons onto the lot. I found mine already taken off.

"It was back there beside that little building where they do servicing and repairs. They had the trunk open and the hubcaps on and were all over it

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washing and polishing. No dead body. I saw Klopton storming around. He all but begged me to wait around for an hour or so and take it off their hands—they were crammed for space, had to have the extra room, so on. I couldn't hang around that long. I said I'd be back next day, meaning Wednesday, yesterday, and left."

"And then?"

"Yesterday noon I thought of running over from the hospital for it, but called first, happily. This time it was the car that wasn't ready."

"They say why?"

"They were on it, but very busy. So I went on over after work and drove it home."

"Straight home?"

"Straight."

"But never opened the trunk until this morning?"

"No, no reason to. I'd seen everything Tuesday night. This morning, though, I had a rug to drop off at the cleaners, so I hauled it out and unlocked the trunk and opened it. There he was. No signs of physical violence that I could see. Rigor mortis, no? He's been in there since sometime between Tuesday evening and when I picked the car up Wednesday evening, yesterday."

"Maybe," I said. "We're waiting on the medical examiner."

"What do you mean maybe?"

"Someone could have stuck him in there while the car was in your carport last night. What did you do when you came home?"

"Nothing, as usual. Ate, read the paper, watched the television past the late news, and went to bed." She was shaking her head positively. "No, they couldn't have done it here. Why me? And who'd have the key to the trunk? And would he have stiffened up that quickly? Anyway there's a streetlight out there glaring right in my front windows and all over the back of the car."

"You didn't by chance leave the keys in it?"

"Never do. Why?"

"I was thinking of the possibility of someone's taking it away while you slept, putting Brackney in, and returning it."

"No, I thought of that while waiting for you people. There was 25.1 miles on it when I took it off the Klopton lot. It's 6.2 miles home. Added up they come to 31.3 and that's what's on it right now."

"You clocked that 6.2?"

"Deduced it. It's just about on the nose."

I put down my coffee cup and studied a print on her wall. "Twenty-five-point-one miles when you got it. Isn't that a bit

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much mileage for a new car just out of the factory?"

"Not after I've waited a month for the thing. Don't they drive them around testing them?"

"Not that much—"

"Oh," she interrupted. "You mean—you're saying someone could have driven it away from the lot between Tuesday night and when I got it Wednesday night."

"Did I say that?"

She laughed. "No, but it's the only possible way, Lieutenant Hood. You'll see when you go over to Klopton's. Those cars on that lot, every single one of them is right out in the open with floodlighting all night and heavy traffic around all day, and that all-night restaurant across the street. Impossible to haul a man that size around out there without being seen."

"There's that repair shop in the back."

"No, not that either. They'd need a shoehorn to get just Brackney in that building, much less my car. The shop's packed full, and the cars in there are all degutted or without wheels."

"Well," I said, standing. "Thank you."

"Yeah," she smiled. "Poor fellow, Brackney. I hope it was painless. He looks placid enough. The longer I stared at him the more it entered my calloused old mind that what was on his face was a little smile. A sort of smiling option. Should I wait here for your vast squads of experts?"

"You can hardly take him to work in your car."

A square, elevated office glassed around like an air-control tower overlooked the merchandise from center rear. Cars, new and used, jammed the halfblock with white splashes of NEAT!—NICE!!—or SEE TO BELIEVE!!! on their windshields. All were right out in the open—hoping for rain, I assumed, and a nice free wash job. A gas pump stood beside the small repair shop in back. Men worked over cars there. This was deep into the business district, 6.2 miles from the Truett home, just as she'd said.

I had stepped over the single-chain barricade along the sidewalk and was moving in when a fat man spotted me from the glass office and came out like a squeezed seed. Gross bulk and hearty stomach considered, he had the easy poise of an old-time vaudevillian. He had a swollen, happy face, teeth sparked with gold, and a round red drinking nose. The tag on his sports shirt read *Emmett G. Mooney, Klopton Motor Sales.*

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"Yas suh, yas, suh!" he said.

I showed him the badge and said my name.

"That don't change a thing, sir. Everybody's welcome. Something here for everybody, every budget. Take a look here. You see this green sedan?"

I saw it.

"Make you a deal on this little number. We get in it, you drive it over to Cable Downs for the feature race, fifty miles going, fifty coming back, and if you get one squeak, rattle, or hiccup out of this car I buy you a steak dinner. If not, you buy me one. I like to eat."

I saw that, too. I let him blow as we strolled, a song of hyperbole and softshoe and golden lies. It was soporifically harmless. You could get to like Mooney. You could find yourself respecting him—or secretly envying him—for the sheer, unashamed ease of his worthlessness. No news had yet leaked about the dead man showing up in a Klopton car; he had nothing working to constrain him. So I let him talk.

". . .or is this strictly official business, Lieutenant? There ain't nobody done nothing *wrong* around here."

"Is Klopton around?"

"I'm glad you asked that question. No, he's not. And won't be in till afternoon. He got hung up here all day yesterday, what with the tax assessor and a load of new cars, and had to drive over to Halletsburg this morning about a fleet deal. It was my lead, that fleet deal, but guess who's taken it over?"

"How much work is there to servicing a brand-new car for delivery, Mr. Mooney?"

"Just about what you'd expect. Gas and lube, wash and wax, hubcaps out of the trunk, points, timing, brakes, adjustments—whatever we might find wrong."

"This is done back in that shop?"

"Not very often. Too crowded. Right now we couldn't squeeze a golf ball in there."

"You try to keep your new cars over there, don't you?" I said, pointing to an area on the boulevard.

"Right as close to the passing traffic as we can get them."

I had worked my way to the new Pythons. Nine were left. They lined the ground abutting the front sidewalk, bumpers against the sagging chain. "All new, these?"

"Right off the carry-all Tuesday evening." He pinched his bulbous nose. "Cotton pickers."

"Who's that?"

"Them two guys on the carry-alls, coming in here at five fifteen in the evening, just when we were fixing to close. Old

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Klopton went off like a bomb."

"These look pretty tired, don't they? You don't wax them for display, or put on the hubcaps?"

"Not till there's a buyer, Lieutenant. We hose 'em down a little, but that's all. You know how long hubcaps last. Some of these cars, they'll be standing here in the weather for a month or so. See, we got no room for a building to keep them in and no place to expand. But the location here, you just can't beat it."

"And how long does it take to process a car for a customer once it's bought? Or, say, for a car that's been ordered and you've got the buyer waiting?"

"Depends on how fast they want it. Going like hell, barring trouble, we can jam one out of here in an hour or two. That's if the paperwork's all done."

I leaned into the first car and looked at the odometer. I circled around to the next and proceeded on down the line, checking mileages. "What kind of mileage should a new car have on it when they deliver it to you?"

"When it gets here? Oh, I'd say generally anywhere between two and eight or nine miles. Ninety percent of the time. It varies. A lot of things can happen between here and Detroit." He followed behind me. "You're not looking for run-back odometers, are you, Lieutenant? 'Cause we don't do that. There was a time, maybe, when you almost had to, for self-protection. Now they got that law in."

I came out of the last Python and turned to him. "Mooney," I read off his name-tag. "Weren't you a partner here?"

"Partner hell, I *owned* it once—started it up in the forties. Got to playing the horses. Expensive wife. So I let Klopton buy in. It was Mooney and Klopton. Then it was Klopton and Mooney. Right now it's Klopton and nobody." He shook his head dolefully. "Hated to lose it but had to have the dough. Hospital bills, divorce, alimony. Woman's taken every cent I had, house in the country, furniture. Give you some free advice, Lieutenant?"

"Sure."

"You ever tangle with a hungry woman that was just too much for you, if you know what I mean?"

I considered what he meant. "No, but I'm always looking."

He laughed his bawling, brainless laugh and slapped me heartily on the back. "You're the kind of a man I could do real business with, Lieutenant. Any time, day or night, just

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don't come Sunday morning 'cause that's when we all go to the church of our choice."

I studied the Pythons. "Can you think of any reason, or any occasion, for anyone's taking a new shipment of cars like these and driving them away from the lot? Lack of room to display them, so on?"

"No, and if we did we'd shift the used cars. These new Pythons here, they're our bread and butter."

"I see."

He followed me away. "Call me-any time, Lieutenant—three in the morning if you decide you want a clean car and I'll come down. Catch me in the right mood I'm just liable to give you one free!"

Inept a liar as he was, I'd hoped for results less confusing. If someone had taken the Truett car joy-riding off this lot, then they'd taken every car of that shipment with it. Every mileage I'd read varied from Mooney's announced new-car figure by just about 20 miles. I asked him for some phone numbers where I might reach Klopton, accepted his soiled business card, and left.

Mapes, our college man, rapped a jaunty two-fingered gallopade on the 1925 typewriter in my office. I put down my cup of coffee, got rid of my hat, unwrapped my sandwich, and sat down behind the desk.

"What do we have on David Brackney?"

"Coronary," he said, not looking up. "Heart attack all the way. Unless they come up with something else deep down inside him."

"How long dead?"

"He says roughly thirty-six, maybe forty, hours minimum."

I backed off from the sandwich. "Thirty-six?"

"Or forty, or maybe more. Hasn't refined it. He got called out again."

"That would put it around Tuesday evening then. Same time they got those new cars in."

"But that doesn't mean he was put *in* then, does it? Had all day yesterday, all night."

"Not as stiff as he was."

"How's that?"

"They had to curl him up and put him in before rigor mortis set in, the way he was braced into that trunk."

"That takes about ten hours after death, right?"

"It generally starts then. Go on with Brackney."

"Yeah. I located his doctor through the outfit he worked for, Youngblood Quality Clothes. Doctor said yes, history of heart irregularities and a mild attack three years ago. Cut out smoking, took up jogging,

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got down to about a hundred and ninety pounds. Wham."

"Relatives?"

"None this side of Baltimore, a sister there. Age forty-one. Brackney's been a widower since 1963."

"Talk to his employer?"

"Highest references. Not just graveside talk, either. Walking advertisement for their clothes—they called him Horse Brackney, Horse for clothes-horse. Steady, dependable, hard worker, credit excellence, heavy on the thrift plan, superior references from previous jobs."

"Night life? Women?"

"Oh, he was a gay blade, all right, but kept that part of his life strictly personal. Guy couldn't give the name of a single one of his lady friends. Liked to dance, but never had more than a drink or two a night. No trouble. Neat as a pin whatever he did."

"How about where he lived?"

"That you ought to see. I went out with Norton who's still there. He wants to know if you're coming out or sending the lab people."

"That's not what I asked."

Mapes chuckled. "Well, the doorman, first of all, pointed out Brackney's car to us, parked over there under some trees across Claremont—not in his cellar parking place—with three parking tickets on it and the keys stuck up under the sun visor. The pad is in that new high-rise near Five Points. Expensive as hell, neat as a whistle, no dirty dishes, no mess, even the bed made up." He had an afterthought. "Doesn't mean he couldn't have died there."

"How do you figure that?"

"Well, say now, suppose he had company up there Tuesday night and there came this argument. The guy got him upset and *caused* the heart attack, and watched him keel over and panicked. Some guy that was into him for a few thou, or maybe someone's husband."

"That's superlative thinking, Mapes. All you got to do now is get one hundred and ninety pounds of dead body from there over to Klopton Motors and into that car trunk."

"Not if the nurse came and got him."

"And what'd she do? Wait till the doorman wasn't looking and drive up the elevator shaft?"

"She could have backed up to the service entrance. Say she was this other guy's mistress."

"Or maybe his mother."

"That's free association," Mapes said airily. "Class. Both of which are taught at college."

"Well, here's what you do with those sterling qualities. Keep Norton at that apartment

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and get the fingerprint people—if they've finished up on the Python—over to Brackney's car. Then get on the phone and start calling these numbers until you locate Klopton for me. After that I want you down helping Simpson at Klopton Motors. Between the two of you I want everyone along the block with a view of that car lot questioned. Every salesman there, every mechanic, the people in the all-night restaurant across the street."

The phone was ringing.

"Seven to five it's Buster Keaton," Mapes said.

Buster Keaton Biggs. Captain Biggs. A nickname he has happily never heard. Biggs never in ten years known to smile. I took the stairway and went through two glass doors to his office. He was interested in "the Brackney thing." I told him, off the cuff, what I'd done and found. He closed the slit eyes in his square seamy face and wagged his swivel chair side to side.

"So why are we wasting all this manpower?" he said. "There's no murder involved. Someone just got rid of an embarrassing dead body. I'll take you off it."

"Not quite yet," I said.

"Reason?"

"Reason? A hole I ran across big enough to shove that whole car lot in. Twenty miles of hole, to be exact."

"Describe."

"Well, now, I had the feeling, talking to Mooney, that he was baiting me like a bull in the ring, all but asking me to come charging at him."

"Damn if you're not getting to sound just like that college kid. Is there, by any chance, something you're trying to tell me?"

"Sorry," I said. "Jot these figures down if you want to, it may help. There are 33.3 miles on the nurse Truett's new automobile. I checked it before she even told me. From her house to the Klopton lot where she got the car last night it's 6.2 miles. Checked that, too. Subtract that, it means there were 25.1 miles on it when she drove it off the lot. She noted that when she left."

"So?"

"Twenty-five-point-one. Which figure, it occurred to me, seemed pretty high for a brand-new car that's done nothing but ride in freight cars and a carryall. The conjecture then came: somebody took that car off the lot between the time she first saw it, with the trunk open and uninhabited, and the time twenty-four hours later when she picked it up and drove it home. So I went checking the

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odometers on all the companion cars off that shipment—the nine left there, not yet sold."

"Every one of them had a mileage reading between 22 miles—22.7 was the lowest—and 30 miles—29.4 being the highest. In other words, they fell right in with the 25.1 reading on her car. Meaning what? Either they all came off the carry-alls with those readings, or, once delivered, they were *all* driven off somewhere to accumulate that much mileage."

"Not too plausible. Expect they reached here with those readings."

"Fine if so. It would narrow our search for the locale where it happened. It would mean either that the body was stuck in the car while on the Klopton lot or within the radius of a few blocks during the processing for delivery to Truett."

"But?"

"But. Mooney was with me while I looked in at all those new mileages. He knew what I was doing. And yet when I asked him what kind of mileages new cars normally had when delivered to them, he told me that almost always it would run between two and eight or nine. What I was looking at was just about twenty miles off from his figures."

"You didn't question him on the difference?"

I shook my head. "I had this strange feeling I sometimes get when I'm standing right on top of something important and can feel it but not see it or touch it or pin it down. Either he was lying to me—or those cars were. But why? What was he trying to tell me? Or trying not to tell me? Whatever it was, it involved more than that body stuck in the Truett Python which, I had to assume, Mooney didn't even know about yet."

"And what might that be?"

"I don't know. I just feel it."

"So let's leave your spiritual experiences for a while. Answer me this. How come, if the nurse lady's car was *almost* ready for her Tuesday evening, it wasn't at *all* ready at noon Wednesday?"

"Maybe it wasn't there. Or maybe they lost interest in rushing it when she wouldn't wait Tuesday night. Or Klopton got sore. Sorer. He was sky-high Tuesday night anyway."

"Why?"

"Quoting Mooney: Klopton threw a gasket when they brought all those new cars in on him at that time of the evening. They were getting ready to close."

"Close baloney. You drive by that lot any time up till nine or ten in the evening, they've got salesmen crawling around there waiting for a customer."

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"Salesmen, but not necessarily working mechanics. Klopton could have been overworked. He had a tax assessor due in Wednesday morning."

Biggs looked uncomfortable. He embarked on an elaborate doodle on a pad.

"Go on with your mesmeric Mooney," he said. "When that place started up after the war he owned it. Then it was partners. Now it's all Klopton. Why?"

"Had to sell out, Mooney said. The horses, hospital bills, and an expensive divorce settlement."

"Whose hospital bills?"

"Didn't ask. His wife's if he still had her. Relatives. At any rate he went broke and sold out to Klopton for needed cash."

"So what about him?"

"He interests me. He's one of those big friendly country boys who, just about the time you figure out how dumb he is, walks off with your grandmother's ten-thousand-acre farm."

"Yeah, a regular financial wizard he is—standing out in the hot sun hawking cars on a $100,000 piece of real estate he used to own himself."

"Haven't figured what it is," I said. "Maybe he was just too cooperative."

Biggs tore off the doodle-page and crumpled it. "Well, you'd better find somebody less complicated. I can't spare you beyond today on this thing. You find Klopton."

"Am I dispermitted a thought, Lieutenant?"

"No, not dispermitted," I said agreeably enough, and strapped myself in for a heavy snow job. Klopton had a big-word kit and a nervous mannerism and a briar pipe that leaked philosophic smoke beyond his wise eyes and bald domed forehead. His back was to me. He was flexing and unflexing his knees as he gazed out of his tinted picture window.

"Does a sense of the midnight Byzantines never stir up your sense of humor, you people? Don't you ever see the black comedy in it?"

In what? I was more interested in his acrobatics. Venting intellect, he would rock on his heels and toes and now arch slightly forward from the waist preparatory to straightening with a briskness that popped his knees and shook the rear seams of his tailored trousers. It all served to nullify that really great rhetoric.

"...do you never long for a month off during which you could give full time to your archives jammed with unsolved brutalities, dope rings exempt from prosecution, gambling

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joints running like Ferris wheels, politicos converting water bonds into personal pleasure palaces? What's the word I want? Anomaly. All that undisturbed muck where you live and you come tumbling out of there and find the fissure in a going, money-making, taxpaying business concern and set your wildest sirens ablast?"

I literally rubbed my eyes until stars danced. So much time to say nothing.

"Crime is the anomaly, Mr. Klopton—or it better be. It gives off its own singularities. A blonde hair on a brunette pillow. A button in a driveway. A man spending money he hasn't got. In your case it's the body of a man in a lady's new car. Is that too mundane for our consideration?"

His pipe freed a coil of heady smoke. "I sell up to eight hundred cars a year, Lieutenant. We work off a lot we've outgrown until it's a major operation just fitting in the new merchandise that cascades in. Our repair shop is a sardine can. Growth, Lieutenant, not inefficiency; we've nowhere to expand down there. I employ anywhere from four to seven salesmen and half a dozen servicemen and administrative people, a lot of whom come and go. I have rental property elsewhere and a small trucking firm that takes me away much of the time, so I have to delegate authority.

"There may be thirty or forty people, drifters, drunks, ex-employees, who know the workings of my business sufficiently well that any single one of them could have come in there from the alley last night or the night before and hunkered himself down in the defilade of those automobiles and stuck that body into that trunk."

"And had a key?"

"They sell keys on dark street corners. You know that."

"I'm interested in something," I said. "One of your employees told me that almost invariably new cars delivered off the carry-all will have odometer readings of less than ten miles. Yet the shipment which included Miss Truett's Python showed a constant set of figures running between twenty and thirty miles. Why?"

"Because you listened to Emmett Mooney," he said wearily. "Mooney cannot disengage his fat carcass from the good old days when, as original owner of the company, he exercised the popular practice of setting back those odometers to the chaste low figures he presented to you. On the day I bailed him out of his racing debts and atrocious marriage by

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paying him a huge price for his half of the business, that practice stopped."

"So then twenty-five miles are approximately what your new cars are apt to show when delivered? Why that much mileage for automobiles whose only handling has been on and off prime movers?"

"Accompany me and I'll show you. We get our cars from an assembly point at Fort Hepburn where literally thousands of cars for this whole part of the country are set out. Most cars get there by rail shipment from Detroit; others can arrive from anywhere—the plant in Georgia, another place in St. Louis. Or from dealers who get themselves overloaded, or go out of business, or have franchises taken away.

"We submit our order. An independent firm delivers them in a carry-all, using drivers over whom we have no control. Once they're off that vehicle and on our lot and signed for, only then our responsibility begins. And it's something. They're pretty filthy. We find sandwich wrappers and cigarette butts and articles of clothing and liquor bottles and beer cans and personal belongings inside. We find Coke bottles stuck down inside door panels by disgruntled workers during assembly, or even handfuls of gravel in inaccessible places. Plus defects, some minor, some major, missed by the factory inspectors. All right so far?"

"I'm listening."

"Good. We put ten gallons of gasoline—complimentary—in each vehicle. We put air in the tires and do cursory washing and get the cars out on line. Once one is sold we lubricate and wax and polish. We put the hubs on and check the timing and the points and the serviceman drives it for a brake test. He drives it again, maybe ten or fifteen blocks or so, to check the steering. We align headlights and check nuts and bolts and rattles and irregularities and then run an inspection for the state safety sticker which we apply. Most of this takes movement of the car. A lot of it's been done before somewhere else in that long chain of people getting the things down here. And you want two or three miles on your new car?"

"I would prefer it," I said, waking from a halfsleep. "We can discount all possibility, then, of those new cars having been driven around since delivery here?"

"Driven where?" he asked. "Why? So someone could flip a coin and choose which one to place a body in?"

"You've helped me," I said.

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Helped me. Liars, both of them. Fingering which nugget, I drank coffee at a drug store and then sat down in my own car staring at my own odometer. Had I ever been buried under so much camouflage? Mooney, at least, lied with a bit of verve. Would not, I now asked myself, the manifest a dealer signed when accepting delivery of new cars have entries of the mileages written in? Had to, I decided. Neither had mentioned it. But neither had I brains enough to ask. I was leaning into strange winds and getting nowhere. Forget mileages.

I switched to another consideration—David (Horse) Brackney, the fashion plate, the dancing master, bouncing forth to meet his public in a fine tailored suit and $15 tie and one sock inside out. Maybe Brackney had put the sock on wrong, but I doubted it. Ergo someone else had clothed and besocked him, and rather hurriedly, but with no more than the composure expected of one dressing a corpse one did not want around.

More about Brackney. What flaw made him such an unwelcome item even when his death was from natural causes? Granting his past and his reputation, one came by sheer shrewdness to—a woman? Woman. Describe. A woman the preserve of another man, said man due momentarily off Flight 268 from a town in Sicily? A woman with a fine society reputation?

I came up from the seat. A hotel room, an apartment house abutting Klopton Motors? I subsided. Nothing of that kind within blocks. Where mourned she then, all nicely arrayed on her chaise longue, a martini in one hand, a little canapé at her white teeth, a rose in her hair? Rose. Flowers? "Gorgeous flowers . . .great twenty-dollar armfuls of them." (Lucille Truett.) I climbed out of the car and went back into the drug store to the pay phone.

A singsong voice said, "Chambers General," then whirled me to where Lucille Truett boiled her hypodermic needles. "Oh yes, Lieutenant." "I am interested in a point you made this morning. You say Brackney used to come bringing flowers while you were on duty a few months back."

"Yes, visiting a patient."

"Female, I presume."

"You'd better believe it. He was just one of about twelve of them, circling around like dogs."

"Her name?"

"Unforgettable. The town's premier sexpot. Good Lord," she said suddenly. "Good Lord."

"Yes?"

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"Cecylie *Mooney*. Mrs. Cecylie Mooney. You mean—the Mooney of Klopton and Mooney?"

"Is she?"

"Well, I never *thought* of it. No husband ever came to see her that I know of. Well, I know what he looks like, I'd sure have recognized him and, you know, connected them."

"What was she in for?"

"Nothing very interesting. Female surgery."

"Have you an address?"

"I'm fumbling for the card. Address may be no good, though."

"Why?"

"She talked a lot. Pentathol and later morphine. Without ever identifying him, she was winding up a divorce hassle that had dragged on for a year. Worth the wait, apparently. She clobbered him for everything clobberable—country house, hospital bills, cash, alimony. Whether she kept the house or sold it is something else. It's 109 Sherrill Post Road. Way out, if you know the area."

Nine-point-eight miles past Klopton Motors, said my gauge. Cement became untraveled asphalt which wound down a wooded hill and emptied me onto a clearing peopled by two small stores and a restaurant on the left. To my right was a low rubble wall broken by a pillar gate on which was the figure 109.

I parked outside the restaurant and went in to take a stool between one jar bearing boiled eggs and another with a sprinkling of coins beneath a printed sign: Help Barney. I bought a soft drink and bartered leaden wit with the waitress, a thirty-ish angular figure wearing thick lipstick. On a newsrack were the early afternoon papers carrying Brackney's picture on the front page. I bought one and introduced myself and disposed it before her.

"Have you ever seen this man?"

"Yeah, and I've been sick about it all afternoon. He came in here now and then. A good tipper, beautiful clothes."

"Would you know where he might have been coming from, or going, when he dropped in?"

"Right across the street there, the Mooney place. But I mean never until after the Mooneys separated and got started with their divorce."

"Was he in here Tuesday night by any chance?"

"I was off then, Lieutenant. I live upstairs." She retrieved my empty bottle and wiped the counter. "Tuesday night I'd be surprised if anybody noticed anything. They were running all those cars into the Mooney

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place, back to that barn behind there, throwing dust all over everything."

"What cars?"

"Just cars, I don't know. Must have brought a dozen or more in during the course of the evening, three at a time."

"New cars?"

"By me, honey. They looked pretty filthy to be new. Hubcaps gone off them and all."

"Dealer's tags, maybe? Invoices on the windows?"

"No, I didn't notice, and if I did it wouldn't have meant anything. See, Mooney used to be, before she got through with him, in the car business—maybe still is—and used to bring cars out here and stuff them in that barn. No room on the lot for them, he explained once."

"And these cars they brought Tuesday night, did you notice when they took them away again?"

"Yesterday afternoon, Wednesday, they started. Two or three different guys coming and going. Take three cars off, all three of them ride back in one, get three more."

I thanked and overtipped her. I dropped in a quarter to Help Barney and crossed the road.

Her credentials were formidable and not well hidden. A sheer silken dress the color of her carrot-red hair clung periodically, and red toenails said "Hey" from her little wedgies. Her voice had the texture of light-blue foam rubber.

She led me down a dark hall into a bright sunny room with windows on a cheerful garden. She reached a sofa, twirled so that her skirt flared, and fell back, plucking a cigarette off a table en route.

"What brings you way out here, Lieutenant?"

"A dead man who used to visit you at Chambers General Hospital."

"Dead man visiting me?" She smiled. "I'm sure I'd remember that, wouldn't I?"

"If he came often enough and brought flowers."

"Dead man with flowers."

"David Brackney."

"Oh, Horse. Yes, I heard it on the radio. Terrible. But he had this heart condition."

"When did you see him last?"

"See him? Horse? Not for some time."

"Like last Tuesday night?"

"Tuesday?" She furrowed her brow.

"He was seen coming here." I didn't say when.

"Tuesday? By *whom*?" she flared.

I didn't answer. She didn't pursue it. She had done her little bit. She'd thrown down

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her token resistance; it was not her kind of thing. She dropped her head back, exhaled smoke, and closed her eyes to the ceiling. "That crumb. That hillbilly tub of lard. *He* told you, didn't he?"

I didn't answer.

"And I was doing him a damned favor, letting him use that barn for their lousy cars one last time, and he uses it to get me and Klopton at one whack."

"Mooney."

"Oh, stow it. Play pattycake in your favorite tavern, cop. The man died here in embarrassing circumstances and I damn near went crazy. I asked fatso—Emmett—to help me, *help* me and he smiled his big rotten smile and said sure, nothing to it. He'd put the body in the body's own automobile and leave them both near the body's own apartment building on Claremont. And I *trusted* him. And he wasn't about to. He delivered Brackney's car home okay—empty. And instead he loaded the body into that woman's Python and left it there all night and morning in that barn. You see what he was pulling, don't you? He wanted me in some sordid headlines and Klopton eyebrow-deep in jail."

"You caught Mooney while he was shuttling those cars?"

"Well, you don't think *I* could carry that much dead body around. And it's not like it was murder. Sure, Mooney called me around five thirty Tuesday evening asking if they could stick a dozen cars or so in the barn for the night. I had Brackney here, we were—well—I said yeah, sure, quit bothering me on the damn phone, goodbye. Right after that it happened. Talk about traumatic. Maybe the phone call scared him. I said, 'Hey, big boy, wake up.' Wake up my green stamps, he was dead. So I got dressed and had about six drinks and sat out on the porch waiting for Mooney. And he did that. I hope you give him fifty years."

"For what, Mrs. Mooney?"

"I said quit it. For transporting a dead body around, what the hell."

"You are hardly innocent, I'm afraid."

"*In*nocent. Look, I haven't even heard the word in fifteen years. Give a person a break, will you, Lieutenant?"

"I don't try these things."

"Oh, come on. You sound like Klopton. Old Golden Voice. I'm talking about me and the newspapers and television and being able to walk down the street in this town. Look, some President of the Republic of France died in a love scene about seventy years

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ago and worldwide it's still the hottest little guffaw in fifteen hundred years of French history. Good God, where would I go to live, Antarctica?"

"It happens more often than you think, but I've never seen it in the paper."

"And you've got the whole press in your hip pocket, I suppose."

"I know none of them knows about the inside-out sock."

"*What* sock?"

I explained.

She wagged her clenched face in quiet fury. "Oh boy oh boy, how wormy can you get? So the man had no clothes on, I couldn't handle him, Emmett was helping me, *he* put on those socks. How did I know? Try dressing a hundred and ninety pounds of corpse sometime with your brains about to explode. Boy, I'd like to see *you* in that fix!"

"We try to guard the public decency, Mrs. Mooney."

"Well, you better." She followed me to the door. "Give him fifty years."

"That's a long time without alimony, Mrs. Mooney."

"What do you mean?" she almost shouted.

"You know what I mean. He goes to jail, your alimony stops."

"You can't *do* that!" she shrieked. "I'll deny everything. You conned me out of it. I didn't have a lawyer!"

"Goodbye."

". . .real practical joker, Mooney," said Captain Buster Keaton Biggs. "Two birds with one prone."

"Three counting himself," I said. "He doesn't even seem to care. He'll probably *enjoy* jail, knowing he put it to both of them. Between his wife and Klopton they'd plucked him bare as a Mexican hairless."

"But not in cahoots?"

"No, no. He let Klopton into the business a few years ago when times were tough and little by little Klopton got it all. They made it easy for Klopton. Between Mooney's horse problems and his wife's appetites they stayed insolvent. Once Klopton owned it he'd probably have fired Mooney except for this tax dodge they'd been running about ten years. Which went as follows:

"Years ago Mooney hit on the bright idea of hiding out substantial chunks of his inventory just before the county tax assessor came around for his evaluation. He'd drive a dozen or fifteen or twenty cars out to his barn, leave them for a day or so, gimmick the records, and then retrieve them at the all-clear. Klopton made the mis-

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take of going along with it, even after he'd swallowed up the whole business, being by then into the swindle deep enough. Of course he knew that any time Mooney wanted to he could blow the whistle to the tax people. But he was also one hundred percent sure Mooney never would, since he'd be jailing himself as well as Klopton. Still Klopton, to play it safe, refrained from firing him."

"Who'd they use to help Mooney shuttle the cars that wouldn't spill it?"

"Pay guys out of a bar, or the unemployment office. Tell them they were overstocked and out of room on the lot."

"I interrupted. Go on."

"About five fifteen Tuesday night, the night before the assessor was due, in came those carry-alls with about $50,000 worth of new cars. Klopton was wild. He put his people to work processing the hell out of those two or three that were sold—that included Truett's—to get them, at least, off the lot. Note this urgency in trying to persuade Lucille to take hers home. She couldn't or wouldn't wait. So they recruited a couple of drivers and pulled the disappearing act again. Mooney called his wife and asked if he could bring some cars out for the night. She said okay.

"She had Brackney there and during the shuttle he had his heart attack and died. She waited for Mooney. She called him inside to the bedroom. Mooney took a look. Opportunity knocks. Stick Brackney in a Klopton car and store it overnight and then leave him in a trunk compartment on the lot. Which car? One whose trunk wouldn't be opened on the lot where Klopton, with his local clout and legerdemain, could have quickly rearranged things? No, one of the cars that had just been processed, had the hubs already out of the trunk, one whose trunk wouldn't be touched until after some unsuspecting buyer got it home."

"Truett."

"My guess is he'd seen her come in and look at her new car with its trunk open. He doubted she'd want it opened again before taking it home. At which time she would set the alarms going through the regular police channels, clear out of Klopton's reach."

"And permit you to discover just what you did discover."

"Sure. It was a crime he *wanted* solved, with all the newspaper headlines and exploration into the whys and hows and conditions of death and the reason for all those cars being ten miles out of town. Ruin his ex-wife Cecylie with

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blaring headlines, expose Klopton and the tax dodge."

"Explaining his strange behavior with you this morning."

I smiled. "He knew exactly why I was down there this morning: Truett had found Brackney and called us in. Real subtle he was with his sly bits of information. The word on his wife and the hospital bills and the tax assessor and the yarn on the mileages. If anybody knew those odometers had high mileage it was Mooney: he'd led those little convoys to the barn. Played me like a violin. That's what was nudging me along, that twenty-mile difference between the two-to-nine he announced and the twenty-to-thirty he *knew* they read. Those cars had to have been driven somewhere. So they were. As evidence the mileage thing was junk, but it was just abnormal enough to keep me nosing around."

"That inside-out sock was a nice touch."

"Why, I bet he split his fat gut laughing at the whole thing. No alimony jail here to accommodate him, so he built one of his own. Skewered Klopton. Stuck it right to his freeloading wife: she'll more or less have to get married and off his back to survive."

"And he let you look good solving it."

"Gave me the whole blueprint," I said, standing up. "Like he said, I'm his kind of a man."

"So go on home," Biggs said. "We're booking Mooney. Greater hands than ours will embrace Klopton."

"And Cecylie Mooney?"

Biggs swiveled in his chair. "What about her?"

"The charge?"

He frowned, massaged his thick jawbone, and swung his chair around. "For a—uh—man dying in her bed?" He said, "Go home," and revolved the chair clear away from me, but not in time to hide his smile.

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

In this issue we bring you two "first stories"—numbers 397 and 398—both by teen-agers. Well, not quite: John L. Brown's story was written when he was 17, and Valerie Tate's when she was 20. Both stories have a common thread which we leave to you to discover; yet, as you will see, the two stories could hardly be more different from each other . . .

John L. Brown, at 17, was a student who worked in some of his spare time in a supermarket, packing groceries. In the rest of his spare time he likes to read, act, and write; and, yes, he likes horses but cannot stand dogs . . .

THE MAN WHO TALKED TO PICTURES

by JOHN L. BROWN

"You realize, of course, that the idea of you *talking* to a picture is absolutely ridiculous, don't you, Jerome?"

"Of course I realize it," Jerome replied.

"I mean, you don't really believe you can talk to a *picture*?" asked Uncle Harry.

"I don't know," Jerome answered. "All I know is that I hear a voice."

"Yes, of course," Uncle Harry said. "You can't help it if you hear a voice coming from a picture."

"Don't be sarcastic," Jerome snapped.

"Of course not, my dear boy." Uncle Harry smiled. "Do you know what your problem is, Jerome? No? Then I'll tell you. You're nuts, that's your problem, Jerome. I suppose your smart-aleck doctors have a new name for it now, but that's what is wrong with you. In my day we didn't worry about smart-aleck names. We just said you're nuts and stuck you into a loony bin."

"I am not nuts! And the proper term is insane," said Jerome. "I've talked to a psychiatrist, you know. He doesn't think I'm insane."

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"Of course he doesn't," Uncle Harry said. "If he just came out and said you were nuts, you'd be scared away and he'd lose a patient. You're 'emotionally unstable' or 'hallucinating under stress.' Oh, yes, I've heard all the modern terms."

"My doctor isn't like that," Jerome protested. "I told him everything, and he was very understanding."

"You told him everything, did you?" asked Uncle Harry. "Did you tell him you murdered a man?"

"Of course not!"

"I thought not. You just told him that a picture talked to you. You didn't tell him that it was the picture of the man you murdered. The dear doctor would have been very understanding if you had told him *that!*"

"All right, I didn't think that it was that important for him to know all the details."

"Oh, it's important all right. If he thought that all of a sudden, one, two, three, bang, a picture up and talked to you, he'd have some doubts about your sanity. If you had told him it was the picture of the man you had murdered he'd know it was just your conscience acting up."

"Conscience! That's a lot of nonsense!"

"Of course it is. If you had a conscience you'd have used a fast-acting drug, instead of a slow painful one."

"How was I to know how the drug would work? I'm not a druggist."

"No, you're not, Jerome, but you are intelligent. And greedy. By the way, I never congratulated you on the superb forging job you did on that suicide note. How long did it take you to get the handwriting down pat?"

"About three months."

"It really was good. It fooled the police completely. Of course all your cleverness isn't going to help you now. You'll never benefit from the money you inherited. You know that, don't you, Jerome?"

"Why shouldn't I benefit?" Jerome asked.

"Because that smart-aleck psychiatrist is going to stick you into a loony bin for talking to a picture."

"He isn't going to do anything of the sort!"

"No? Didn't I hear you tell the maid that you would be going into the hospital for tests tomorrow?"

"Well, yes, but only for some routine tests."

"The gas chamber was just routine, too, until they did away with it."

"Don't talk like that,"

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Jerome snapped, "or I'll throw you out of this house!"

"Don't get upset, Jerome," soothed Uncle Harry. "If they do put you away, I'll come and visit you."

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" Jerome turned and stalked away.

"Jerome!" Uncle Harry's voice carried a new note of authority. Jerome came back.

"You were very clever with the police, Jerome," Uncle Harry said, "but did you really think you could escape my wrath?"

Jerome swore and turned away from Uncle Harry's portrait.

"Q"

DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Valerie Tate, author of the second half of this double entry, was in her second year at the University of Toronto when she submitted "Deadly Quintet" ("first story" number 398). She told us she began writing when she was 12, and hopes to make writing her career. Her hobbies include skiing, sewing, knitting, crocheting, crafts, choir singing, and swimming.

It's a curious coincidence that both "first stories" in this issue, one by a 17-year-old young man, the other by a 20-year-old young woman, came from Canada . . .

DEADLY QUINTET

by VALERIE TATE

May 5, 1972

It's getting worse. Their periods of materialization are becoming longer and longer. Each day I have more trouble controlling them. They're like animals. I don't dare turn my back on them. Carey is the

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ringleader. Before he was born they were just mildly troublesome, now they've become unendurable. My friends think I'm mad, and I shall be if something doesn't happen soon to destroy my—my dark children.

Looking back over the years since I started writing, I can see how it's been building up—the characters I had trouble controlling, the things they said and did that I never intended. Until a few months ago that was all it was, but since I created Carey, they've taken on life of their own. I see them and hear them. It's as if they are the writers, and I am one of their characters.

I was a fool to ever create Roger Carey, but it was almost as if he created himself. From the start he was uncontrollable, dark, and evil. His book—and it is most certainly his—is already on its way to becoming a best-seller, which just shows how sick this world is. It is a loathsome book, as is its "hero," and mine only in that it was my hand that wrote the words.

I tried to stop a number of times but Carey wouldn't let me. As his character grew he became more and more powerful, and people from my other books came more and more to life. Rachel Marsden, Carey's female counterpart: lacking the strength on her own to do much damage, she gained power as Carey developed. Jason Ross, a sardonic, mocking monster. Janet Wright, a purring, cuddly kitten with deadly claws. Peter Lampman, more than making up in brute strength and sadism for what he lacks in intelligence. A deadly quintet of degenerates, all the products of my mind!

I was stupid enough to tell some of my friends about them. They think I'm going mad. They say it's my own fault for living alone in my house on the cliffs. When I first moved here ten years ago, all the interfering old busybodies in the neighborhood tried to match me with some spinster or other. I made it perfectly clear then that I wanted no part of them or their spinsters, that I wanted to be left alone to write my books and to enjoy the company of a few old friends. They didn't take much convincing, and now I'm left in my solitude, with my demons.

Three days later, May 8

My publisher spent the weekend here, so Carey and the rest behaved themselves. They didn't show their faces even once while we were together. I wish they had. Now Paul thinks I'm nuts, too. He wants me to move out of the house and to see a psychiatrist. Jason had a

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good laugh over that after Paul had gone. It amuses him to see me squirm, to watch me fight the idea that I'm going mad. I've got to do something soon because even if I'm sane now, it won't take much to send me over the edge.

The next day, May 9

They watch me constantly, give me no peace. I'm becoming paranoid. I see eyes everywhere, I'm afraid of the dark, and the slightest sound makes my flesh crawl and my heart thunder. I know they're planning something—I can see it in their eyes as they watch me. I've seen the same look in the eyes of a cat about to pounce on its prey.

At times, I can't believe there are really five of them. They seem like one. I've tried to divide them, to win at least one over, but they're inseparable. They think as one and act as one. They *are* one, and yet they aren't. They have me so confused that I'm sure of only one thing: slowly but surely they're driving me out of my mind!

The next day, May 10

They've virtually taken over the house. If I don't do something soon there won't be anything I can do. The question is, what? I'm so terrified I can't think straight. The only thing that's preserving my sanity is seeing all this written down in black and white. It's so incredible that every once in a while I manage to convince myself that it's merely a horrible nightmare. This sense of security lasts only until I try to assume mastery of my house. Then I realize all too quickly that it is a horrible reality from which I can't escape, even in my dreams.

I'm completely isolated now. My few old friends have given up in disgust. I scared my cleaning lady half out of her wits this morning. She heard me arguing with Rachel and Roger, but she didn't see them. She quit on the spot. And so, it's me, my dark children, the cliffs and the sea. God help me!

The same day, midnight

I've decided. For better or worse, I've got to do it and it has to be now! There's only one way—destroy all the manuscripts that give them life. I'm going to burn them.

Roger, Jason, Rachel, and Janet are in the sitting room, so I'll use the fireplace in the den. It's far enough away from them not to attract their attention. Peter is in the bedroom down the hall from mine. For all his great strength he is the weakest of them all. To remain materialized he must rest every hour. He'll be no problem.

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Whether or not there will be another entry in this diary will depend on what happens tonight. This may be the final chapter. If so, I can only hope this record will be found by someone who will be able to do what I cannot.

One week later, May 18

Henry Wilson died last week, on May 11, of injuries sustained in a fall from the cliffs near his home. As one who was present during his final hours and who knew him intimately, I feel that it is my obligation to finish this diary and the record of his life.

Having made his last entry in the diary, at midnight on May 10, Henry crept down the back stairs to the den and started the fire. Perspiration ran down his face and chest, drenching his shirt. He seemed to have shrunk to half of his six feet, 180 pounds. His watery-blue eyes were sunken in their sockets, his nostrils pinched. His once thick, iron-gray hair was lank and stringy and had taken on an unhealthy yellowy tinge. Trembling, transparent fingers fumbled through his files as he searched for all the manuscripts.

So intent was he in this occupation that he didn't notice Peter Lampman edging along the hall, past the den, into the sitting room where his four comrades were lounging. Roger Carey, a black-haired, black-hearted scoundrel, was sprawled casually in an easy chair by the mantel. He was chatting quietly with Rachel who was sitting opposite him. Janet Wright, looking extremely bored, was curled up on the couch between them, facing the sitting-room fire. Jason was looking out the window, an amused smile flickering across his face every now and then as if he found something terribly droll in the tempest raging outside.

Carey looked up at Lampman's stealthy entrance. Peter motioned him to silence and in a series of gestures told them of Henry's presence in the den. In a body they moved down the hall and congregated in the den doorway.

"Well, Henry! What have we here?" At the sound of Carey's voice Henry started, terrified. He made a desperate attempt to fling the manuscripts into the fire. In the split second it took him to leap from the files to the fire, Lampman lunged and caught Henry at the knees. Pinning him to the floor, Peter awaited his leader's commands.

"Henry, how could you?" Roger's mocking voice floated across the room to the quivering bundle of raw nerves lying beneath Peter's hulk. "Is that

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any way to treat your children? Well, group, what shall we do with him? The chair will entertain suggestions from the floor." Moving through the door, they stationed themselves at different positions in the room.

Janet sat down on the rug by their squirming victim and methodically made finger curls in his damp hair.

"You know, Roger honey, the old boy's become a crashing bore. Why don't we just get rid of him, once and for all? We don't need him any more."

"What do the rest of you think, Rachel?"

"I agree. He's becoming too dangerous. Look what the silly old goat just tried to do—destroy us! He can't be trusted. As far as I'm concerned, the only question is, how."

"That won't be hard," Jason's voice broke in. "He's a bundle of nerves now. One good *BOO* would do it."

While they discussed the question, Henry managed to recover some of his self-control, and when Janet moved to a more comfortable seat on the sofa, he made his move, shoving the nearest manuscript into the flames. Immediately the weight on his back disappeared, as Peter Lampman crumbled with the paper he was made of. There was a stunned silence as the conspirators stared at the place where, up to a minute ago, their comrade in villainy had been. Henry took advantage of their momentary confusion to grab what papers he could, and fled.

He ran down the hall and out the front door into the storm. The others, having regained their sense, followed him as he fled across the lawn toward the cliffs. Along the edge they flew, Henry wild-eyed and stumbling, Carey and his friends deadly determined. Miraculously, Henry seemed to be outdistancing them, when he picked a fatal moment to look back. Tripping over a rock in his path, he tumbled headlong down a cliff to the rocks below.

The next morning some teen-agers found his broken body, the pages of his manuscripts scattered around him. His neighbors say it was a terrible tragedy, but then what could you expect from someone like him? Henry's friend and publisher, Paul Brant, bought the house, but a funny thing, the neighbors say he's begun to behave very strangely. He sees things, and hears things, and claims the place is haunted! Now who would believe a thing like that?

Roger Carey

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a NEW detective story by

DENNIS O'NEIL

Rafael Xavier Grogan was a retired private eye. He had just moved into the area, near a small town in Missouri, and was still not accepted by his neighbors. So when the local Sheriff asked for help, in a delicate situation involving the old Eisel-Singleton feud, Grogan just couldn't ignore the plea. He had to find the x-factor, the one elusive thread in the design . . .

ALIAS THE LAST RESORT

by DENNIS O'NEIL

Kobo and I were standing ankle-deep in mud, looking for the damage that the storm may have done to our farmhouse. The storm had been fierce—a full day of wind funneled up the river that drove rain in great gusting torrents across the bottomland to the meadows beyond.

Our house stood on a low knoll, almost completely unprotected. We had stayed inside the whole time, me reading, Kobo meditating or fooling with chess problems. At one particularly scary point Kobo suggested that we console ourselves with the *I-Ching*, the ancient book of oracles. I found the section titled Chen—Thunder, and read:

"Thunder—success! . . .The sacrificial wine is not spilt!"

I didn't understand it, and if my stepson did, he didn't choose to enlighten me, but the words were comforting. Maybe I was seeing myself as sacrificial wine.

Despite the buffeting our house was still in good condition—shingles intact, asbestos siding firm.

"We're lucky," I murmured.

"Calls for a celebration," Kobo said. "Hamburgers, french fries, a double-thick shake."

"None of which we have, as you well know."

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"That new place in Feeley does."

"Nope. I won't fill your belly with plastic food."

"What *will* you fill me with, Rafe? The pantry is empty except for barley and brown rice. Barley *again*? Yuck. Come on, Rafe—live."

I was formulating a reply, a devastating answer that would remind my ten-year-old Japanese genius who was *boss*, when we heard an engine growling in the distance. I trotted to the access road, a ribbon of loose gravel, and peered. In the foggy twilight I could barely discern a pickup truck passing our gate, its headlight glare rippling in the puddles.

"We've got company," I called to Kobo.

"You're saved."

"From what?"

"Making a decision. 'The gods shelter the inadequate.' "

"Which Oriental wise guy are you quoting now?"

"Kobo Daishi Grogan, sagest of the kiddos."

By then the truck had stopped under the big elm in our yard, and a large youngish man in a gray uniform climbed out. His crew-cut head was bare, his face sunburned. I noticed his hand resting on the butt of a holstered revolver and, involuntarily, I tensed, and edged close to Kobo, all the while realizing I was being stupid. My uneasiness vanished the instant he spoke.

"Mr. Grogan? Mr. Rafael Xavier Grogan?" He asked my name like a second grader asking to be excused, please.

"Yeah, I'm him."

"I'm Deputy Lansing from over the Sheriff's office?" His inflection kept rising; apparently, he wasn't sure of *his* identity, either.

"Hello, Deputy."

"Sheriff Matt wants to see you."

"Have I committed some crime?"

"No, sir. He's got a problem he reckons you can help him with."

"Why me?" We were volleying questions like ping-pong balls.

"You being a big city detective and all?"—the inflection rising again.

"Not true. I'm retired." But that wasn't exactly true; I was in the process of retiring, of selling my share in Grogan-Schultz Inquiries, Inc., to my partner, Barney Schultz. But I still accepted an occasional assignment, primarily to pay bills; the farm wasn't yet self-sustaining.

"Could you explain to Sheriff Matt?" Lansing said.

"Hang on a minute, Deputy."

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I led Kobo to the far side of the house. "Got an opinion, Kobo? Shall I venture into the fray?"

"You'd rather not."

"Emphatically, I would rather not. I'm trying to shake the private-eye thing."

"You'll have to decide, Rafe. It's your karma." He wasn't joking: his aversion to organic diet notwithstanding, Kobo Daishi Grogan is his mother's child; he takes his religion seriously.

I tugged at my beard and ruminated. I was a widower, newly arrived in the area, with probably the only precocious Oriental lad between St. Louis and Oklahoma City. Often, I sensed suspicion and vague hostility in the local tradesmen's rural cheer. They didn't trust me—fancy investigator with the inflated reputation—and they trusted my stepson's skin color even less. And we'd made a commitment: we were going to live there. Could I afford to ignore a plea for help from the law? No, I couldn't.

"Be with you in a bit," I yelled to Lansing.

Kobo followed me inside. I shucked my overalls, washed, and donned a James Bond costume—beige turtleneck, brown slacks, desert boots. I slid into a tweed jacket, brushed hair and beard, and was ready.

"Go to sleep early," I told Kobo, not because I doubted his good sense, but because I lacked a direct, honest expression of love.

"I will. Rafe, the Buddha said, 'We are heirs to our actions.'"

"And tonight I'm inheriting fifteen years' worth of violent, nasty life, huh?"

"It's your karma," he repeated.

"Thanks a lot."

I left him quickly and hurried outside. Deputy Lansing waited in his truck. I got in beside him and watched his forehead, blue in the dashboard lights, crease with concentration as he manipulated the gearshift. As we were passing the shed I almost asked him to stop. I remembered the tarp-shrouded sports car and, in the glove compartment, the loaded Browning 9 mm. automatic I'd once used to kill a man. But I said nothing. I owed Kobo and myself an end to violence and it was time to start paying that debt.

Lansing turned south on Highway P. "Hey," I protested, "this isn't the way to Feeley."

"We ain't heading for town. Trouble's over the Singleton farm."

"What trouble?"

"I druther Sheriff Matt filled you in."

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Okay, I thought, be a clam, if you have sufficient IQ, which I doubt. I settled back and, ignoring the teeth-rattling jolts whenever we struck a pothole, gazed out the window. The sky was clearing; wispy clouds blotched the full moon, and stars were beginning to show. To our left the river glinted; to our right mist rose from the fields. The scene might have been painted by the Japanese master Hiroshige—serene, harmonious.

Abruptly the beauty vanished. I was looking at Industrial America in all its gruesomeness—specifically, the huge lead refinery completed ten weeks earlier by Bridge Industries, a welter of smoke and flame-belching monstrosities with cinder block walls and tin roofs. Hiroshige would have gagged.

Highway P skirted the plant and wound upward, west, into low hills. I knew people farmed here; I couldn't guess why. The soil was surely rocky and unfertile, unlike the rich bottomland. The hillfolk had a reputation for cussedness and superstition, and such traits were understandable considering the misery each day must bring. Small wonder refinery labor came chiefly from the region; at least Bridge Industries guaranteed a Friday paycheck.

We drove for three miles, covering approximately a mile and a half of actual geography. Lansing braked next to a sagging wooden fence and opened his door.

"We go on foot. Truck's tires are bad."

I trailed him onto the fenced ground, my boots slurping in the mud beneath the high grass. Something loomed in the darkness ahead, haloed in a dim glow behind it, something tall and, given the context, absolutely weird: a windmill, blades spinning slowly in the mild breeze, groaning and creaking, the blue-black sky winking between them.

We circled this anachronism and reached our destination. First I saw the house, like a high-contrast photo, every detail sharp—the peeling white paint on the clapboards, the rocking chair on the low listing porch, the rustling screens fronting broken windows, the jagged chimney top. It resembled a stage set for "Tobacco Road," an illusion heightened by the spotlight that illuminated it. The source of the light was a police car parked in the yard. A bulky shadow detached itself from the darkness and drew near.

"That you, Lansing?"

"Yessir, Sheriff Matt. I brung Mr. Grogan."

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The shadow thrust out a hand. I grasped a dry callused palm and we shook. "Mr. Grogan, I'm Sheriff Matt Olbrick."

"A pleasure, Sheriff."

"Please come this way, Mr. Grogan." He nudged me toward the car, a curiously weak gesture for a lawman, and, on principle, I momentarily resisted before falling into step beside him.

"We got a problem I figured you might help us solve," he said.

"I'll be happy to do what I can."

"Fine, fine."

He leaned against a rear fender and pulled a cigarette and lighter from a shirt pocket and lit up. In the flame's flicker I glimpsed his face—wide, pale, with pouches under the narrow eyes and the mottled nose common to hypertense alcoholics.

He was bigger than Lansing, as big as me, but his uniform hung loosely; he'd lost weight recently. He exhaled noisily and I smelled liquor mingled with the smoke. A cop lush, the worst kind, generally jealous of their authority, terrified of losing their jobs, impossible to deal with. I recognized a possible self, a yet-might-be version of Grogan; once I too had been a drinker. Consequently I despised him as one despises a life-long enemy.

"Your problem, Sheriff?" I prompted gruffly.

"Well, seems there's a fellow in the house yonder is holding a girl at gunpoint."

"A kidnaping?"

"No, not so simple. It's personal."

"Personal how? Sex?"

Olbrick snorted. "Naw, he ain't been interested in that for years. He's old, seventy-five, thereabouts."

We weren't progressing. I said, "Maybe you'd better tell me the whole story."

"Well, there's been bad blood 'twixt the families for generations. Started back in World War One, been going on ever since. The Singletons hate the Eisels, the Eisels hate the Singletons. Everybody's forgot the reasons."

"Who's holding who prisoner?"

"Aw, old Frank Eisel's got the youngest Singleton—what's her name—?"

"Betty?" Lansing said from somewhere nearby. "He marched right into her paw's store two hour ago and took her."

"Sheriff, isn't this out of your jurisdiction? Feeley must be a good twenty miles east of here. Isn't this a matter for the Highway Patrol?"

"Happened in my town."

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I had a sudden hunch and asked, "You were a witness, weren't you?"

Olbrick jerked as though he'd received an unexpected jab. "Wasn't nothing I could do without risking the girl."

"Eisel had a shotgun," said Lansing.

Another hunch: "You're up for reelection in November, Sheriff?"

I could see him nod yes.

The situation stank. A drunken officer and his oafish deputy had permitted an abduction to occur in their presence. They were stymied—they didn't dare summon official help, not with the election less than two months away; no, their single chance to save their cushy jobs was to demonstrate a competence they didn't possess by returning the abducted girl unaided. And they couldn't. They'd failed. Enter, then, Rafael Xavier Grogan, alias The Last Resort.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

Olbrick dropped his cigarette and said, "Eisel's feared of us, won't let us come near. You being a stranger, he might."

"I should talk to him?"

"That story in the paper," Olbrick replied hoarsely, "about you killing the fellow in St. Louis. That true?"

I couldn't deny it: to my dismay, the "new arrivals" column in the Feeley *Clarion* had mentioned the incident just after Kobo and I established residence. "Yes," I said.

"You still pack a gun?"

"No."

Olbrick produced an object and gave it to me, a Charter Arms .32 revolver, the "Undercoverette" model. Zealous cops carry them hidden as a second, usually illegal weapon, imitating the Wild West gunmen who carried sleeve derringers.

"You ain't forgot how to use one," Olbrick said.

"You point and pull the trigger—*you*, Sheriff, not me. My gunfighting days are over. I've plumb gone to pasture. Sorry."

"Might be the only way to save Betty Singleton."

A hint of slyness in his tone betrayed his studied nonchalance. Oh, he was a clever old boy, Matt Olbrick was—clever as a skunk and as obvious. If I managed his shooting chore, he'd manage to grab the credit. If I failed and the girl died—*Heck*, he'd drawl, *the dang fool ruined my play*. And if the dang fool got himself shot, that would suit Matty. In fact, he'd plain *prefer* it; there'd be nobody to testify to his incompetence.

Old Matty boy had picked me for a Judas goat and,

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possibly, a target. I wasn't honored. I handed him his .32.

"Sorry," I said again. "I don't shoot anybody. I *will* speak to the man."

"Go ahead."

I moved into the spotlight beam, my spine tingling with a slight fear, and shouted, "Mr. Eisel!"

There was motion behind the screen door.

"Mr. Eisel, I'm Grogan. I'm not a policeman." I spread my arms wide. "I'm unarmed. Can I talk to you?"

No answer.

Slowly I approached the house, slow, easy, as I'd approach a skittish cat. I felt like a soldier on a disgraceful retreat.

"Coming in, Mr. Eisel," I called out.

I was held by an oppressive quiet that could be, at any second, shattered by a shotgun boom or a pistol crack. I swallowed saliva and crept forward. The porch boards creaked. I stopped, reached, pulled the screen door handle and entered a room barren except for a piebald sofa, a wooden chair, a low table, and a glowing Coleman lamp on the floor. The two of them were also on the floor, huddled in a corner.

I squinted, focused my vision. Frank Eisel was bare-chested. Skin draped in folds on his shoulders, forearms and belly; his torso and head were bony, ribs and cheekbones starkly visible. The pants he wore were patched. He was inhumanly ugly.

"Evening, sir," I said, and looked at the girl. She startled me. I had expected a wholesome milkmaid type and instead I was seeing the ghost of Flowerchild Past, a stick-thin young woman in red sandals, jeans embroidered with butterflies, and a chambray shirt. Her waist-length hair was dull brown, her complexion chalk-white. Her chin was forced upward by the muzzle of the double-barreled shotgun Eisel clutched, his forefinger on the trigger, his thumb on the cocked hammer.

"Far enough, boy," Eisel commanded.

"Mind if I join you?" I hunkered into a lotus position.

"Say your piece and git."

I hesitated. A wrong beginning could send .12 gauge pellets ripping through Betty Singleton's skull. I said, "Betty's parents are mighty worried."

"Liar! Andy Singleton don't care."

"He's right," Betty said. "My old man won't pay for the funeral. I'll be buried in the county cemetery."

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"Not for a long time yet, I'm sure."

"Don't be," Eisel snapped. "The witch's got till dawn to lift her curse on me, then I'm killing her."

"Curse?"

"He thinks I'm a witch."

"You are," Eisel said. "You run to the city and learned witchcraft. Hell, you *bragged* on it."

"That was just something to say," Betty whined. "People were bugging me."

"Mr. Eisel, I'm new in these parts. I don't understand."

"She learned it in New York."

I shifted my attention to Betty. "New York. East Village? West Village?"

"All around. I just—hung out. You know?"

I did. I'd seen them, the ghosts, the remnants of Camelot, begging spare change in slum streets, hitching rides to towns like Feeley, arms needle-scarred, futures empty. Always running *from*, not *to*.

"I came back in late July—"

Eisel interrupted, "—I commenced to having fits, falling and slobbering and rolling in the dirt." He was seeking release; he was desperate to articulate his agony. I encouraged him.

"Any particular hour of the day?"

"Sundown. I'm sitting in my rocker like always and it hits me, and the next thing I'm laying in the dirt. Every damn day!"

"Including today?"

"No. 'Cause I captured the witch." His lips twisted, revealing broken, stained teeth. The gun barrels trembled and pressed Betty's flesh. The memory of pain was pushing Frank Eisel to murder. Although she was innocent, the girl would be spilled like sacrificial wine, unless I saved her. Should I have accepted Olbrick's revolver? Or should I try to jump Eisel and hope to numb his arm with a blow before his forefinger squeezed?

No, that was reasoning like the brute-Grogan I'd foresworn. The maddened, superstitious farmer and his frightened captive presented me with an opportunity. Put a little reverse spin on the karma, Professor G. Do good and—miracle!—leave blood unshed. Perhaps.

"Best you git," Eisel said.

"Just a few more minutes, sir," I pleaded. "Tell me, have you ever experienced the symptoms of the curse before?"

"Symptoms?"

"The fainting, the rolling."

"It's happened," he growled. "Not regular, though."

"Ever see a doctor?"

"Don't believe in 'em."

There was a gestalt, and in it

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a solution, like a solitary thread in a tapestry. I mentally reviewed what I'd learned. Frank Eisel's seizures occurred at dusk, and mostly since July. He habitually sat in his rocker, on the porch. I visualized it: Eisel rocking in the shade, facing east, the sun's rays slanting overhead. He'd have a clear view of the yard and—

"I was admiring your windmill," I said. "They're rare in Missouri."

"My son Jake built it," he told me. "Modeled on ones he seen overseas in the army. Jake's gone now." He droned the information as a priest drones a litany for the dead.

Okay, he'd see the windmill, the fence, the road, the valley below, and the lead refinery—the smokestacks, the construction equipment, the tin-roofed buildings. He'd fall down raving. Today he'd been spared; that was the x-factor. Why not today? I answered myself, and found my elusive thread.

But he probably wouldn't accept my explanation, so, although the mystery was solved to my satisfaction, I still had to disarm him.

"Mr. Eisel, I studied magic in my youth. I recall a spell for removing curses and I'd like to try it on you."

"You stay put," he warned. "I can work it sitting."

Doubt and hope warred in him, and hope won.

"No funny business."

"No funny business," I lied.

I began to chant a meditation mantra, a favorite of Kobo's: "*O mani padme hum.*" Any arcane sound would have served; this was misdirection. As I chanted, I passed my elbow up and down in front of the lamp, steadily, rhythmically: light, dark, light, dark, light . . . "*O mani padme hum.*"

Frank Eisel's face brightened, darkened, brightened, flashing like a monotonous signal. Gradually his mouth slackened, his eyelids drooped, his body seemed to collapse as if the bones were dissolving, the vital juices evaporating. Light, dark, light, dark . . . on and on.

His hand relaxed on the shotgun and the gun started toppling. I uncoiled, lurched forward on my knees, and snatched it. Then Eisel went rigid. His eyes were staring sightlessly and from deep in his throat he moaned. He rolled onto his side and howled; his arms and legs thrashed; spittle glistened on his chin.

"My God," Betty breathed. "He *is* possessed."

"No. He's sick."

I fumbled a key case from my pocket and forced it into Eisel's mouth to prevent him from swallowing his tongue.

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"The Sheriff's outside. Have him radio for a doctor."

Betty scurried off. I sat on Eisel's legs and held his wrists to the floor, ignoring my revulsion at the coldness of his skin and the musty odor of age filling my nostrils. The thrashing subsided. Finally I heard a distant ambulance siren, and stood up. My sweater was drenched with sweat.

The screen door slammed. "Everything under control?" Matt Olbrick asked. He was holding his service revolver loosely, uncertainly.

"Who you planning to shoot—Eisel, me, or both?"

"Nobody," he mumbled.

"Difficult to explain the corpses, eh?"

"You done me a favor I won't forget."

"You bet you won't."

Anger and loathing gripped me and I became the old Grogan. I crossed to him and deliberately and brutally elbowed him aside.

At home I located vodka and vermouth in the kitchen cupboard and mixed a martini in a jelly jar. After an initial taste I took the drink to the bedroom and perched on the edge of my bed. Kobo stirred and awoke.

"How was it, Rafe?"

"Grim. I had to cause an epileptic fit in an old man and insult a sheriff."

"Anything else?"

"I may have saved a girl's life."

"Tell me about it?"

I told him what had happened. When I'd finished he said, "I still don't understand what caused Eisel's seizures. The rocking motion?"

"No, a blinking light. Regular, rhythmic blinking can cause fits in people with certain forms of the disease."

"Where'd the blinking come from?"

"Remember the terrain I described. Eisel was facing the windmill."

"But the sun was behind him."

"Yeah, shining directly on the new tin roofs of the refinery. The reflection was broken by the turning windmill blades. Today it didn't happen because there was no sun. I imagine the unexpected absence of his daily misery gave Eisel the notion to capture Betty. It released him from despair."

"And you duplicated the blinking effect with the lamp."

"Exactly. The lesser evil."

"Pretty neat."

I drained the jelly glass and undressed.

"Rafe?"

"Uh huh."

"You did handsomely by your karma tonight."

I slept well.

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a *NEW* Raffles story by

BARRY PEROWNE

The Real McRaffles—beautifully executed and as smooth and suave and mellow as Harvey's Bristol Cream (founded 1796) . . . join A. J. Raffles, famous cricketer and infamous cracksman, as he takes part in a Foxhunt, attends a Hunt Ball, plays in a cricket match, and as a "gentleman of prey," stalks the valuable D'Arzac Coronet . . .

THE RAFFLES HUNT

by BARRY PEROWNE

Through the glades of the New Forest, early one winter morning, sounded the note of a hunting-horn and the belling clamour of an eager pack.

"King Rufus's Foxhounds," said A. J. Raffles. "We're late for the Meet, Bunny!"

We quickened our hired horses to a canter through the oak wood and found ourselves in a clearing where a timeworn stone slab reared shoulder-high from a drift of dead leaves. Nearby, on a small grey mare, sat a man with a small grey beard. Pink-coated, like ourselves, he stood up in his stirrups and raised his rather rusty tophat to us.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he said, as we reined in, raising our own well-burnished toppers. "The Hunt's moved off, but I saw you coming, so I waited for you. I'm Habbakuk Hooper, the Hunt Secretary. I fancy you're the visiting Londoners, Mr. Raffles and Mr. Manders, who're lodging at the Shergold cottage?"

"We saw the accommodation advertised, sir," Raffles said, "with a promise of fox-hunting."

"Indeed, yes. We of the Hunt are always pleased to have visitors contribute their guinea apiece for a day with the hounds. Ah, thank you," said Habbakuk Hooper, as we produced the wherewithal from the pockets of our white cord

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breeches. "This is a special day—the twenty-first birthday of our Master of Foxhounds' daughter, Miss Philippa Morton, and your contributions make you welcome guests at the Hunt Ball this evening at the seat of the Darsey Mortons. Meantime, behold The Rufus Stone, where the Hunt met just now."

Waving his riding-crop at the timeworn stone slab, he read aloud in a high, pedantic voice its partially defaced inscription:

" 'On this spot stood the Oak Tree from which an Arrow, shot by Sir Walter Tyrrel at a Stag, glanced and struck King William Rufus in the Breast, whereof he Instantly Died, on the Second Day of August, A.D. Eleven Hundred.' "

Through the brooding glades sounded again the note of the horn, more distant.

"Our Master of Foxhounds," continued Mr. Hooper, as we rode on our way, "is himself of Norman stock. His forbears were the Counts D'Arzac-de-Mortain—their name rendered into our bluff English tongue as Darsey Morton. You'll have heard tell, perhaps, of the D'Arzac Coronet?"

"Coronet?" said Raffles.

"The last Count of the D'Arzac line in Normandy," said Habbakuk Hooper, "bequeathed the Coronet to the English branch of the family, with the proviso that a custom of the D'Arzacs be perpetuated—namely, that on the eldest daughter in each generation reaching her twenty-first birthday, the Coronet be presented to her, in trust. And tonight at The Moot Hall, seat of the family, you'll see our M.F.H., Sir Darsey Morton, Baronet, place the Coronet on the head of his daughter Philippa—to her secret dread."

"Dread?" Raffles and I said simultaneously.

"The Coronet," said Mr. Hooper, "has brought only misfortune and catastrophe to all the daughters of the house who in turn have inherited it. Gentlemen, take note of Miss Philippa to-day. Watch her take her fences. You'll see a girl of courage. She dreads this evening's ceremony, but she'll not evade it."

"If her father knows she dreads it," Raffles said, "why doesn't he spare her this experience?"

"Because he despises superstition—or claims to," said Habbakuk Hooper. "I say 'claims to' because he loves his daughter dearly. And, gentlemen, I've often thought it significant that, despite the great intrinsic value of the Coronet, Sir Darsey keeps it in a mere glass-doored Chippendale bureau in his study.

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Doesn't such lack of elementary precaution betray an urge to tempt Providence—a secret hope, subtle and perhaps unadmitted to himself, in the heart of our M.F.H.? I fancy so!"

My scalp tingled. In all my life I had never heard, innocently given, so open an invitation to A. J. Raffles, gentleman of prey. I dared not look at him as we rode out now from the oak glades on to open heath.

Under heavy clouds, bespoked by the rays of a sullen sunrise, undulations of wine-dark heather, dotted here and there by Forest ponies, rolled away to the horizon, and before us a grit road sloped down to the roofs, mostly thatched, of a village that straggled widely about a steepled church.

"Brackenbourne," said Habbakuk Hooper, "and there's the Hunt, gentlemen, taking the first of its five stirrup-cups!"

"Five, Mr. Hooper?"

"When the Meet's at The Rufus Stone, Mr. Raffles, it's a Hunt tradition to pass through this nearby village of Brackenbourne and take a stirrup-cup at each of its five inns. I may add that I'm by way of being the local artist. I designed and painted the inn signs myself, and their modest size and consistent style has been favourably commented upon by the County newspaper."

Nevertheless, as we tailed on to the Hunt and I glanced up at the inn sign—The Hawk and Heron—which depended on hooks from a beam protruding from the inn's low, thatched eaves, I could not help wondering if Mr. Hooper was not perhaps a more accomplished Hunt Secretary than artist, though obviously he painted from a lavish palette.

We were too late for a stirrup-cup at The Hawk and Heron, for the Hunt was moving on—the pack of tan-and-white eager hounds, the male riders mostly pink-coated, the ladies black-habited and tophatted in their side-saddles, and the villagers, looking on excitedly, in their rustic motley.

"A great turn-out for this Birthday Hunt," said Habbakuk Hooper. "There rides our M.F.H., gentlemen—the tall, grey-moustached man on the chestnut, with his Huntsman riding beside him. And there, Mr. Raffles, Mr. Manders, is our birthday girl! Ah, hah, see how that great roan stallion of hers kicks and prances! Javelin's feeling his oats this morning. Miss Philippa's three chevaliers had best keep their distance. Not that they will, of course! They'd ride through fire and brimstone to keep at her side!"

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I saw that the three fine-looking fellows so hazardously attendant on the slender, dark-haired girl in the side-saddle of the temperamental roan were in Army uniform.

"Officers," Habbakuk Hooper explained, "from the County garrison. The one in scarlet is Major Hector Barron, of the Lancers. The one in artilleryman's dark-blue and gold is Captain Hugh Archibald. And the handsome chap in Rifle Brigade bottle-green with black buttons is Captain the Marquis of Stoneycross. They bring their own chargers and batman-grooms with them and spend the night at the village here—in different inns, I may say, for they're at daggers drawn over Miss Philippa."

Mr. Hooper chuckled a shade maliciously. "To-day may be the last chance any one of them has to get her, for they're all three on stand-by orders to embark for India."

The Hunt paused again at another thatched inn on the road that curved through the village. Under the sign of The Coronation Arms, with its dangling portrait none too recognisable as the recently crowned King Edward VII, the beaming landlord and his buxom spouse awaited us with laden trays.

This time I got a stirrup-cup, which proved to be sherry, a passable *amontillado*. When the Hunt moved on to The Bell-ringers Inn, near the church and the village green, we got sherry again, a good *manzanilla;* and at The Speckled Trout it was sherry once more, a nutty *oloroso*. But at The Bugle Boys we got a rum punch that set the hunting blood coursing hotly through my veins as, to the cheers of the local gaffers and hobbledehoys, hounds and riders began to stream on out of the village.

"I fancy, Mr. Raffles, Mr. Manders," said Habbakuk Hooper, "that Sir Darsey'll draw the Driftway first. An artful dog fox often lurks there, licking his cynical whiskers at us from the coverts. Ah, hah, yes! Excellent! Sir Darsey's heading for the Driftway!"

To the note of the horn, the Birthday Hunt surged out over the heathland, the hounds with their tails well up and their noses well down, in quest of the Driftway fox.

Unfortunately, we found him. And so gruelling was the run which he gave us, before he went mockingly to earth in a chalkpit on the downs fifteen miles away, that I ached in every muscle and, that evening, did my utmost to get out of going to the Hunt Ball, birthday or no birthday.

But Raffles insisted, with the

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result that, in the fine old ballroom of The Moot Hall, seat of the Darsey Morton family, I had to grit my teeth and, despite my aches and fundamental soreness, dance with a succession of ladies. I had just escorted one of them back to her chair when I found Mr. Hooper, in vintage evening-dress, at my side.

"Ah, hah, Mr. Manders! An animated scene, is it not? Did you notice the way Miss Philippa put her horse Javelin at that dangerous gate to the Driftway covert?"

"I did indeed, Mr. Hooper. My own horse refused it—so emphatically that I fell off."

"Yes, I saw you cut a voluntary there. Yet how boldly Miss Philippa sailed over it! Confidence is all, Mr. Manders," said Habbakuk Hooper. "A little sad, is it not, that from the moment she receives her birthday gift Miss Philippa will no longer feel such carefree confidence."

Thus reminded of the D'Arzac Coronet, I glanced hastily around the ballroom for a glimpse of Raffles amid the revels. To the lilt of the orchestra in the minstrels' gallery above the double doors standing wide open to the panelled hall, the dancers wove their vivid kaleidoscope.

Misgiving seized me. Raffles was conspicuous by his absence.

"Miss Philippa this evening," said Habbakuk Hooper, "is as beautiful as some raven-haired damsel at the Love Court of Margaret of Navarre. It's the blood, you know—the Norman strain, Mr. Manders. Yet is she not a little pale, a little tense, as she dances there in the arms of the dashing Lancer, jealously watched by the gallant Gunner and the noble Rifleman? Poor girl, I fancy so! The ceremony looms very close now. Ah, hah, I see Sir Darsey talking to the Chief Constable of the County—an honoured guest and firm supporter of the Hunt, Mr. Manders. I must go and shake him by the hand. Pray excuse me."

Left alone, I took out my handkerchief to mop my palms, suddenly damp—and I saw Raffles. He appeared from the hall. His dark hair crisp, his evening-dress immaculate, he paused casually in the wide doorway. His grey eyes surveyed the dancers as he took a Sullivan from his cigarette-case.

I started towards him, to demand where the devil he had been, but he noticed a neglected lady, returned the cigarette to his case, approached her with a bow, and escorted her gracefully into the maze of the schottische.

As I stood dismayed, a tink-

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ling sound from the hall caught my attention. It was the tinkling, faintly audible through the music, of champagne glasses on super-trolleys wheeled by a bevy of fresh-faced parlour-maids. Marshalled by the butler, the trolleys bore a sumptuous collation. Alone in its glory on one of them was a fine birthday cake bearing twenty-one unlighted candles.

The butler came into the ballroom for a quiet word with Sir Darsey. The tall, grey-moustached M.F.H., in his hunting-pink dinner-coat, accompanied the butler into the hall. Standing as I was at an angle to the doorway, I saw Sir Darsey cross the hall, open a door, close it behind him.

The ceremony was indeed imminent. I knew that he must have gone into his study to get the D'Arzac Coronet from the glass-doored Chippendale bureau. My heart thumped. Premonition curdled in me.

The study door opened. Sir Darsey came out. The butler handed him a lighted taper. Sir Darsey touched the flame to each of the twenty-one candles, returned the taper to the butler, came into the ballroom and, looking up at the minstrels' gallery, raised an arresting hand.

The violins fell abruptly silent. Expectant, the dancers made way for the M.F.H. to walk to the centre of the floor. He looked around at us.

"My friends," he said quietly, "I know you're all anticipating an ancient custom of this house to be observed here to-night. That ceremony will not take place. I have to tell you that the D'Arzac Coronet has disappeared."

Dead silence. Then a harsh voice: "Sir Darsey, I suggest that the outer doors be immediately locked and a search organized of everybody present."

"My dear Chief Constable," Sir Darsey said, "whatever unknown hand has been at work here tonight, I am unalterably convinced that it was not the hand of any guest under my roof. What has happened—has happened. It must not be allowed to spoil what remains to be celebrated—for it comes but once in a lifetime."

He beckoned toward the doorway. And the butler entered, wheeling the trolley bearing the cake with its lighted candles, followed by the line of smiling parlourmaids. Voices buzzed, corks popped, the bubbly fizzed. Philippa, radiant, the shadow lifted from her life, blew out the candles and cut the cake. Her father kissed her—and we raised our glasses to her, one and all of us:

"Many happy returns!"

As we drank, spurred boots

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stamped in the doorway. We all looked that way. There stood, stiffly at attention, a man in mud-spattered uniform, helmet clamped under his arm, on his sleeve the gold stripes of a sergeant and the crossed flags of the Corps of Signals. His voice rang loud in the sudden hush: "Dispatches for Major Barron, Captain Archibald, and Captain the Marquis of Stoneycross."

The three officers went to him and he handed each of them an envelope from the pouch on his belt. They tore open the envelopes.

"India," said Major Barron. "Sir Darsey—Philippa—I'm so sorry. It's immediate embarkation from Southampton."

Father and daughter accompanied the three officers into the hall. And as a hubbub of voices broke out, one said softly in my ear, "And when he got there, the cupboard was bare—and so the poor dog had none."

I met Raffles' eyes. Vivacity danced in them.

"Which of them was it, Bunny? Which of them, with the same motive as myself, got to the D'Arzac Coronet before me—the dashing Lancer, the gallant Gunner, or the noble Rifleman?"

Summer came to the New Forest. In mid-July, when the deep glades were in full leaf and the pony-trails which meandered over the heaths were dust-white under a quiver of heat-currents, Raffles and I returned there at the invitation of Mr. Habbakuk Hooper.

Besides being the Hunt Secretary, he also was Secretary of the New Forest cricket club, The Rufus Stonemen, and he wrote inviting the pair of us—though the one he really wanted was A. J. Raffles, well-known as a cricketer—to turn out for the team against a County Eleven in the cause of Queen Alexandra's charities.

It was a Sunday afternoon match played on the village green alongside Brackenbourne church, with the usual cider-drenched convivialities afterwards at The Bellringers Inn. The night was dark when Raffles and I emerged from the inn. We were putting up again at the Shergold cottage, and, still in our blazers, white flannels, and cricket boots, we mounted the bicycles we had borrowed from Mr. Shergold and his son.

There were no lamps on the bikes and, as we freewheeled round a bend in the dark lane through the woods, an ambling pony and her foal suddenly loomed up before us. I swerved to avoid the foal and, my night sight perhaps a shade impaired by cider, ran into a pedestrian

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and knocked him for six.

He seemed to be some kind of tramp and, though we helped him up and dusted him off, he did not take the trifling mishap in a sporting spirit.

"No bloody lamps!" he snarled. "Skylarkin' bleedin' cricketers!"

"Never mind," said Raffles. "You shall have a quid to soothe your feelings and a drink to brace you up. Come on, we're staying at that cottage through the trees there."

In the cottage parlour, when Raffles turned up the wick of the oil-lamp, the spirit-tantalus and a plate of sandwiches awaited us on the table. Seeing the sandwiches, the tramp made no pretence of ceremony but started cramming them into his mouth with both hands. He had no cap. His bullet head was close-cropped, his stubbled face had a cadaverous pallor—and Raffles, as he poured three stiff whiskies, surmised in a pleasant tone, "Just out of quod, aren't you?"

The tramp's munching jaws froze.

"Don't let it embarrass you," Raffles said, smiling. "A spell in quod can happen to the best of us."

The tramp's jaws resumed munching. "All I done, guv'nor," he said, his accent Cockney, "was fetch me wife a love-tap or two, to shut 'er trap. Would you believe it, she 'ad me up for assault. I got three months in Wormwood Scrubbs. I got out last Wednesday, took to me 'eels when I saw 'er waitin' for me, an' tramped down from London to find this Brackenbourne place."

"Got a job to go to in the village?" Raffles asked.

The tramp's eyes, beadily appraising, flickered from one to the other of us as he munched. He took a swig of whiskey.

"I'm on probation, gents—ticket-o'-leave. Wherever I go, I'm supposed to report to the police. Them stinkers'll tell my wife where I'm at, an' she'll come yar-yar-yarin' after me an' 'ave me up again—for non-support. No, I don't want no job in this country. What I want is to get aht of it—on a ship from Southampton, over yonder."

"Getting a ship could be a bit awkward, couldn't it," Raffles said, "for a ticket-of-leave man?"

"Money could fix it, guv'nor—palm-oil, see? I ain't got no money, but I got information what's worth money. I'm lookin' for a family o' gentry 'ereabouts, which I don't know their name but it seems they lost a valuable a while back—an' if I can find the fam-

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ily, I got news for 'em."

I felt a sudden excitement. I looked at Raffles with a wild surmise. He sipped his drink, his eyes on the tramp.

"If the lost valuable is a Coronet," Raffles said, "I'm afraid I must warn you that your news will *not* be welcome to the family concerned. They never want to hear of it again."

The tramp's jaws clamped, in shock.

"So it *is* a Coronet," said Raffles. "I see. Well, now, as it happens, you're talking to friends of the family. We have their interests at heart. If your information's useful, *we* might help you get a ship out of Southampton—with a modest stake in your pocket."

"Stone the crows," the tramp said slowly, "me luck's changed!"

"We'll see," said Raffles. "What d'you know about that Coronet?"

"Guv'nor," the tramp blurted, "it's 'id in the inn at Brackenbourne!"

"Which inn?" said Raffles. "There are five of them."

"*Five* inns?" said the tramp, dismayed.

"So you don't know the name of the inn," Raffles said. "That's a pity. Well, now, I think you'd better tell us just what you *do* know."

The tramp told us that at Wormwood Scrubbs Prison he had been put in a cell already occupied by two men. One of them, a man called Garner, was serving six months. The other, a native of Limehouse, London's Chinatown, was called Sing and was serving three months.

A letter had been smuggled in to Garner, who had bragged to his cellmates that it was a letter which would make him rich when he got out, as it was from his brother, an Army officer's batman-groom stationed in India, and the letter told Garner where a Coronet worth thousands was hidden.

"From what Garner told me an' Sing," said the tramp, "it seems Garner's brother an' 'is officer was spendin' the night at an inn. Garner's brother 'ad to drive 'is officer an' two others in a 'ired pony-trap to a 'Unt Ball, see? Well, Garner's brother were waitin' around outside the mansion, like the rest o' the gentry's drivers, when 'e 'appens to notice a window open stealthy-like. 'E glimps summat green an' a kind o' sparklin' object throwed out into the laurel shrubbery.

"Well, the window shuts, an' Garner's brother goes an' moseys around in the shrubbery, an' lo an' be'old, finds a Coronet in the damp leaves. So Garner's brother figgers it's stole, see, an' the thief plans to

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pick it up when the gentry's all gone 'ome. So Garner's brother pockets the object, thinkin' to wait on events, as you might say."

"One might indeed!" Raffles agreed.

" 'Owsomever," said the tramp, "a Signals sergeant comes a-gallopin' up the drive wiv dispatches. Turns out it's immediate embarkation orders for the three officers, an Garner's brother 'as to drive 'em back post'aste to get their gear packed. Well, 'e knows 'is own kit'll get inspected, for embarkation, an' 'e can't think what the 'ell to do wiv the Coronet, so 'e 'ides it right there in the bleedin' inn."

"And writes from India," Raffles said, "asking his brother to collect it and dispose of it for him?"

"Right," said the tramp. "On shares, fifty-fifty. Garner reads out bits o' the letter to me an' Sing, but 'e don't mention the name o' the place, nor of the inn neither, an' when I asks 'im, innocent-like, know what 'e done, guv'nor? Puts the letter in 'is bloody great mouth an' eats it!"

"So how," Raffles said, "did you get on to the name of Brackenbourne?"

"Ar, I were one too many for 'im there," said the tramp, with satisfaction. "You gets allowed two books a week out o' the Scrubbs library—one what they calls Devotional type, one what they calls General Interest type. Well, Garner 'ad a book out, an' I seen 'im mark summat in it. So when 'im an' Sing's got their 'eads down asleep, I takes a dekko through the book. It's about this 'ere New Forest and some bloody Rufus Stone, very 'istorical, an' there's a map of the Forest, an' what Garner's marked wiv a circle round is a village—Brackenbourne."

"So you put two and two together," Raffles said. "And now it's added up to five. Five inns!" He puffed a cigarette alight over the lamp-chimney. "Is Garner still in the Scrubbs?"

" 'E is, guv'nor. Sing got 'is release about two weeks ago. I got out Wednesday last. Garner—let's see, now—". The tramp looked suddenly startled. "Stone the crows, 'e's due out to-morrow!"

"*Is* he now," said Raffles. "H'm! Well, my friend, to-morrow I'll take you over to Southampton and see if I can find a venal ship's captain for you."

"God bless yer, guv'!" said the tramp. "It'll make all the difference, me bein' under a gentleman's wing!"

"Palm-oil speaks louder than breeding," Raffles said. "Thank you, however. Now, for to-

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night, you can curl up in that basket-chair. I'll pin a note to the door, to warn our landlady there's a guest in the parlour. Make youself at home and help yourself to the whiskey... Come, Bunny, I have some instructions for you."

Outside the massive, grimy portals of Wormwood Scrubbs Prison, in the summer sunshine of the following morning, a London bobby paced slowly to and fro. At a discreet distance along the unsavoury street, on which pallid faces looked down longingly from barred windows above spiked walls, a hansom stood waiting.

In the hansom sat myself and Ivor Kern, the "fence" with whom Raffles and I occasionally did business. Before dawn that morning, I had cycled to Lyndhurst Road, the little New Forest station that served the Rufus Stone area, and caught the London & South-Western Railway milk train up to the capital.

Raffles had taken the tramp to Southampton, while I myself, on reaching London, had collected Kern, a gloomy, young-old man with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the London underworld, from his antique shop in the King's Road, Chelsea, and we had proceeded at once in this hansom to Wormwood Scrubbs.

Kern took out his watch. "It's gone ten o'clock, Manders. What if this Garner fellow's already been released?"

"That'd be just too bad, Ivor," I said. "Raffles' instructions were that I was to get you, then watch for Garner, follow him, find out where he lives. In the event of his catching a train down to the Forest, I'm to wire Raffles at the Shergold cottage and go down on the same train as Garner."

As I was speaking, a clip-clop and jingle were growing louder from behind our hansom. A closed carriage, too smart to be a hackney cab, went by—and I caught a fleeting glimpse of the driver's face. It was a hard, impassive face, sallow under a bowler hat. My breath caught in my throat. The man was Chinese.

"The Limehouse man!" I gripped Kern's arm. "Garner's recent cell-mate! Ivor, as sure as fate, that's Sing!"

A short distance ahead, and nearer the prison portals, the four-wheeler pulled up. The driver, lean and wiry in a blue serge suit, twisted down sidewise from his seat on the box and seemed to be speaking to some person or persons unseen within the carriage. Then he straightened up and, his back to

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us, the horse's reins in his hands, sat waiting.

Kern said softly, "Manders, the Tongs hang out in Limehouse, and that chap looks to me like a Tong hatchetman!"

Even as he spoke, I saw a wicket door in the iron-studded portals of the prison opening. A man with his belongings in a brown-paper bundle under his arm stepped out. He looked a rough customer. As the wicket closed, the bobby said something to him. In reply, the released prisoner hawked insultingly and spat on the cobbles. Then he saw the four-wheeler. He stared at it for a moment, then walked across to it.

"Well, chase me up a gum tree," he said, "if it ain't the unscrewable Oriental! What's this, then? Figger it's 'ard on a bloke not to be met, Sing? Come in yer employer's carriage to drive an old pal 'ome in style?"

Sing was nodding, all smiles.

"Why, Sing," said Garner, "such loyalty is what I likes to see. Me palatial residence is 'alfway up the West India Docks Road an' you shall 'ave a cut off the fatted calf when we gets there. 'Ome, me lad, an' don't spare the 'osses!"

With a regal gesture, he opened the carriage door—and disappeared into the carriage with a jerk, as though suddenly assisted from within. The door thudded shut, Sing whipped his horse around, and as the carriage came clattering back past our hansom, I thrust up the trap door in the roof and rapped at the cabbie, "Follow that four-wheeler!"

As we jingled off in pursuit, Kern said wryly, "Fatted calf, eh? There'll be funeral baked meats for him if he doesn't come up fast with the information his captors want. Typical paltry crook—brainless—no sooner out of quod than the Tongs nab him! Manders, I want nothing to do with Tong highbinders. You can let me off at the corner."

"Raffles' instructions," I said, "were that we were to follow Garner."

The hunt led us, to my surprise, into the West End, teeming with horse traffic and the eerily gliding electric broughams. Through Knightsbridge bowled the four-wheeler and into the Cromwell Road. Here, in this respectable residential area, the carriage turned off to the right. As we reached the corner, I spotted that it was the entry to a *cul-de-sac*—and, in the nick of time, I called to our cabbie to drive on. Just past the corner, I stopped him, dismissed him with a sovereign for his trouble, and, with Kern, walked back to the corner.

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Peering around it, I saw that to either side of the *cul-de-sac* were the sunny back gardens of houses, while across the dead end were green-painted double doors with the carriage standing facing them. Sing was unlocking the doors. As he opened them, I glimpsed the small yard of the kind of private coach-house which abounded in this district. Sing, afoot, led horse and carriage into the yard, then ran to shut the doors, and I heard bolts drop, rattling, into their sockets.

"Come on, Ivor!" I said, and we hurried along the *cul-de-sac*, opened the gate of the little garden just to the right of the doors, slipped in, crouched down behind a big fuchsia bush in crimson bloom.

"What d'you plan to do?" Kern whispered.

"Watch those doors," I said.

Hooves clip-clopped to and fro along the nearby Cromwell Road. Bees bumbled around us in the flowers. It was hot. Interminable minutes passed. Suddenly I heard a rattle of bolts. The coach-yard doors opened wide. Two men in long white dustcoats and deerstalker caps appeared on the threshold. They were big men, solidly built. The slightly shorter but bulkier of them took off his cap to mop beads of sweat from a large, pink, hairless head. He beamed genially at his harder-featured companion.

"Sing's a good lad, Bart," said the pink man. "He keeps his ears open for us—even in quod. I'll raise his wages one of these days."

"If he hadn't been caught with doped beefbones to put those mastiffs to sleep, Flood," growled the hard-featured man, "we'd have made a good haul, back there a few months ago, and he wouldn't have landed in quod."

Kern's fingers were biting like screws into my shoulder. He breathed in my ear, "I know these men!"

The pink man put on his cap, took from his dust-coat pocket a leather cigar-case. "It was the rub o' the green, squire," he said. "You know your trouble? You brood over the past. It makes you surly. You want to be like me—keep your head down and your eye on the ball. Right now, we've got one tee'd up for us. We shook the name of the inn out of Garner, and just where the Coronet's hidden there. Have a cigar."

Kern breathed in my ear, "Five years ago I 'fenced' a haul of Queen Anne silver for the pink fellow."

I put a warning finger to my lips. The fragrance of Havana cigar smoke floated to us

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through the fuschias. From the court-yard came strange sounds, a kind of metallic cranking and gasping.

"No need to hurry ourselves, Bart," said the pink man. "We don't want to reach Brackenbourne village till about midnight, when all's quiet. We'll take our time on the road down, lunch at some good pub, dine at Winchester. There's a hotel there famous for its lobster mayonnaise and Rhineland Hocks. Garner can stay tied up in the coach-house here. If we collect the Coronet from where he claims it is, he gets five per cent of the proceeds."

"Two-and-a-half," growled the surly man.

"We'll call it three," said his companion, "to make up for the way you knocked him about when we had him in the carriage. You don't realise your own strength at times, squire. Anyway, Hollings can stand guard over him here till we get back to-morrow. We've only got Hollings half trained as our butler yet, but he's got a gun and knows how to use it. And so do we." The pink man beamed genially, his greenish eyes glinting. "Eh, squire?"

A sudden clatter and roar broke out in the coach-yard. I heard a grinding sound. A vehicle nosed out through the coach-yard doorway. It was an automobile, one of the first I had seen at such close quarters. It had high mudguards over its metal-studded anti-flint tyres. Its great carbide headlamps glittered in the sunshine. Sing, who had changed his coachman's bowler hat for a chauffeur's peaked cap, sat behind the steering-wheel. He tugged at the brake-lever on the step of the tonneau. The automobile halted, throbbing with horsepower.

Sing donned goggles as his employers pulled shut and locked the coach-yard doors. The two bulky scoundrels in the deerstalker caps and linen dust-coats also donned goggles. The genial man climbed up to the front seat beside Sing. The surly man mounted into the rear of the four-seater tonneau.

Sing released the brake and, with a surge of power, the automobile rolled off along the *cul-de-sac*, turned to the right into the Cromwell Road. The horse of a passing hansom shied violently, rearing. The sound of the automobile receded into the distance, bound for the New Forest, as Kern and I stepped out from our hiding-place into an acrid vapour that had dowsed the fragrance of the motorists' Havanas.

"Ivor," I said, more shaken than I cared to show. "I'll wire Raffles, at the Shergold cottage,

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a full account of the situation, in the private code we use. Then I'll take the first train I can get down to the Forest. You say you know these men?"

Kern nodded grimly. "Chauffeur, butler, automobile, Hock, and lobsters! Manalive, the pink fellow's gone up in the world! Five years ago, he was a half-starved crook known as 'Smiler' Bunn. He's put on flesh. His ugly-tempered partner was a fraudulent company promoter—used to call himself Lord Fortworth, Chairman, on his prospectuses. He had to disappear for a while." Kern drew in his breath. "My God, Smiler Bunn and ex-Lord Fortworth! Easy Street Experts, that Combine! Manders, tell Raffles to watch his step!"

"So you've had a disturbing day, Bunny," Raffles greeted me, as I stepped off the train at Lyndhurst Road halt that night.

Clean-cut, hatless, his tweeds impeccable, a pearl in his cravat, he was awaiting me under the dim oil-lamps of the little station in the Rufus Stone area of the Forest.

"The earliest train I could get out of London," I said, "was the six-thirty to Southampton, and I had a maddeningly long wait there for the local to Lyndhurst Road."

"It's now about eleven-thirty," Raffles said. "Come on! Your borrowed bike's where you left it here with the Stationmaster this morning, and I came on the other bike to meet you."

"What about the tramp?" I asked, as we pedalled off on our lampless bikes along the lane into the woodlands, darkly brooding under a quarter moon.

"No great problem," said Raffles. "I got him on to a ship bound for the River Plate. Your long telegram was waiting for me when I got back to the Shergold cottage."

"Where are we headed for now?"

"Brackenbourne, of course. Where else?"

"Raffles, there are three of them in this motorist gang, and they're armed—as we never are. They know the name of the inn. They know where the Coronet's hidden there. They'll get it. I ask you, what earthly chance have we got of wresting it from them?"

"There's a principle, Bunny, which I've found to be sound in practice."

"What principle?"

"Just to take things as they come," said Raffles. "By the way, did you get a newspaper to read on the train?"

"I had other things on my mind."

"You missed something,

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then—an announcement, Bunny—the engagement of Philippa Morton to Major Hector Barron."

"Then it was probably he," I exclaimed, "who stole the Coronet!"

"No, Bunny. He's a Lancer."

"What difference does that make?"

"Garner's brother, the batman-groom," Raffles said, "glimpsed 'something green' at the moment a sparkling object was thrown from a window of The Moot Hall. What he glimpsed, almost certainly, was the arm of the thrower. But, Bunny, a Lancer's mess-jacket, like his uniform, is scarlet. The only man wearing green at the Hunt Ball was Captain the Marquis of Stoneycross—in the bottle-green mess-jacket, with black buttons, of the Rifle Brigade."

"Good God, Raffles!"

"The D'Arzac Coronet's reputed to be unlucky. For the Marquis, Bunny, it has lived up to its reputation. His chivalrous theft availed him nothing. The Lancer got the lady."

"Then be warned! Raffles, be warned! The Coronet can prove as luckless for us as for the Marquis!"

He only smiled. From the dark coverts a roosting cock-pheasant sounded its hoarse alarm note. We emerged from the woods. Moonlight illumined faintly the wide, rolling heaths. Below us, down the slope of the grit road, lay Brackenbourne. Not a light was visible.

"Forest folk retire early, Bunny. The village has been dark since just after ten tonight."

Freewheeling, silent as shadows, we sped down the slope. Nocturnal coots piped and splashed restlessly in a pond to the right. We rode into the village. The thatched dwellings to either side of the road that curved like a strung bow through the village were silent and dark. We came to the church, on its small knoll in the village centre. To the left of the church lay the village green, where dark blots marked recumbent cows chewing their cuds.

"The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep," said Raffles, as he opened the gate to the churchyard with its mossed and leaning tombstones. "Put your bike against the inside of the wall, Bunny. From here, among the yews, we can see each way along the curve of the village street. Let's have a smoke."

He gave me a cigarette, held a match-flame in cupped hands to it. His hands were steady. Not so were mine. He lighted his own cigarette, held the match-flame to a lichened

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tomb-slab. On the slab lay a short ladder.

"Better not sit on our friend Habbakuk's ancestors," he said. "'Here lie Ebenezer Hooper, died 1803, Huntsman to King Rufus's Foxhounds, and His Spouse, Abigail, died—'"

"Look!" I said.

The match went out. Far off beyond the green, a light moved. Surmounting a swell, the lilac glare of carbide headlamps lanced out over the heaths. In the steeple above our heads, the clock began mellowly to chime.

"Punctual, aren't they?" said Raffles. "Well, well! The amazing Mr. Bunn and Company."

The midnight chimes, so close, drowned for us the throb of the approaching automobile. Its headlamp-glare scythed round on to the road dipping down to the village—and vanished. And the last chime struck. Now all was still.

"Pulled up on the slope," Raffles murmured. "Coming into the village afoot, so as to make no noise."

I strained my eyes. Clouds, slow drifting, obscured the horned moon. A pony whickered, far off, and was answered from nearby. Unshod hooves came tapping briskly along the village street. Shadowy, three ponies trotted past the churchyard gate and vanished on to the green.

Moonlight began to return, spectral. Cloud-shadows stole over the low, thatched roofs. We trod out our cigarettes. My heart pumped, heavy. Far long the sleeping street, a pencil of light rayed upward, and was instantly gone.

"D'you see them?" I whispered.

"Just," said Raffles. "There's their light again."

It showed for an instant, pointing up, then was gone. The moonlight faintly strengthened. Vaguely, then, I discerned them—two bulky figures pale in dust-coats, and a dark-garbed figure lithely bending.

"The chauffeur," I whispered. "Can you make out what he's doing?"

"Seems to be unfolding something, Bunny. Yes, it's an extendable ladder. He's propping it against the inn there—at the angle of the thatched eaves. He's going up the ladder."

"To enter through one of those little casement windows under the eaves, Raffles—while his employers stand guard—goggled men with guns!"

"He's not entering the inn, Bunny. No, I see what he's doing. Come on!"

Mystified, I saw Raffles pick up the short ladder which lay on the Hooper tomb. Carrying

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the ladder in one hand, wheeling his bicycle with the other, he moved away between the yews. I followed, wheeling my bike. We emerged from the churchyard by another gate, on the side away from the Bunn marauders. The bend in the village street hid them from our view. We mounted, riding away from them. About a couple of hundred yards on, Raffles dismounted. So did I.

"Hold my bike, Bunny!"

While I held the bikes, Raffles propped the ladder against the eave-angle of the inn here. Clouds obscured the moon as he mounted the ladder. He seemed to be thrusting something up into the thatch. A sound of snoring reached me from a small upper window, latched open on this warm night. Something dropped, soundless, from the eaves. Peering down, I made out a last year's bird's nest. Raffles came down the ladder.

"Now, Bunny, we'll detour round over the green and regain the road about half-way up the slope."

It was bumpy pedalling, Raffles carrying the ladder, lamplighter style, on his shoulder, but we reached the road at a point about fifty yards above the pond where the restless coots piped and splashed. As we pedalled on up the slope, we came upon the Bunn Combine's automobile, drawn up with its lights off at the roadside. Raffles dismounted, dropping the ladder.

He climbed on to the step of the automobile, gripped the steering-wheel, turned the front wheels to a slight angle. He stepped down, released the brake-lever. The automobile began to move slowly down the slope.

"Automobiles," he said, as he picked up the ladder, "are a menace to every pony wandering free in the Forest."

The automobile, gathering speed, jolting, was travelling at a shallow angle aslant across the road. We remounted, pedalled on up the slope. All of a sudden, from behind us, sounded a considerable splash, followed by scandalized ejaculations from the coots.

We gained the woodland at the head of the slope and, within ten minutes, quietly entered the parlour of the Shergold cottage.

Raffles turned up the lamp-wick. The spirit-tantalus and a plate of sandwiches awaited us on the table. The casement window was wide-open to the garden.

Still breathing hard from the ride, I burst out, "What was the idea of planting something in the thatch of an inn that the

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Bunn gang has no reason to go to?"

He gave me a quick look of surprise.

"Why, Bunny," he said, "at about half-past ten tonight, when Brackenbourne had bedded down, I cycled quietly through the village with Mr. Shergold's ladder on my shoulder. As Habbakuk Hooper remarked, the inn signs he painted are of modest and uniform size. I found it quite easy to lift them from their hooks and deal the pack afresh."

"Deal it *afresh*, Raffles?"

"No problem at all, Bunny. So, naturally, as the motorist gang was judging by the inn signs, whichever inn they went to was bound to be the wrong one. At the same time, the one they went to told me which was the right one. Then I only had to watch what they did at the wrong one—and I knew what to do myself at the right one.

"I left Mr. Shergold's ladder in the churchyard, in case it might come in useful, then cycled over to meet you at Lyndhurst Road station."

He puffed a cigarette alight over the lamp-chimney.

"Planting? Why, no, old boy. Emulating the action of the Smiler Bunn gang's chauffeur at the wrong inn, I was groping in the thatched eaves of the right inn for something already planted—by Garner's batman-groom brother on the night of the Hunt Ball, as he hastily packed his own and his officer's kit in the inn bedroom just to the left of the eave-angle. Plant, Bunny? You and I don't plant. We reap."

He took from his pocket a red bandanna handkerchief, unfolded it on the table. The gems of the luckless heirloom of the Darsey Mortons dazzled my eyes.

"Oh, dear God!" I could barely breathe.

The decanter glugged as Raffles poured whisky. "An exhilarating hunt, Bunny—from stirrup-cup to nightcap. Of course, this is a very ancient Forest. When it's found that all five inns have changed names in the night, and furthermore a mechanical menace to the ponies and deer is discovered strangely bogged in the coots' pond, no doubt there'll be loose talk among the rustics about the Forest spirits being at work on a night when a horned moon rose over the Rufus Stone." He chuckled. "But you and I are Londoners, Bunny. Superstitions, legends of misfortune, have no meaning for *us*. So why are you looking at the D'Arzac Coronet with such a peculiar expression?"

I was about to answer when,

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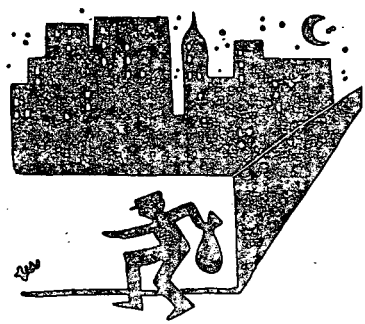
silently, ghost-pale out of the night, an apparition materialized at the open window. The words froze in my throat.

For an instant, from the sill, a great white owl with a field-mouse struggling limply in its beak stared in at us with huge eyes glowing green, enigmatic and blind in the lamplight.

Then the wide wings spread. The owl floated away, soundless.

Neither Raffles nor I moved.

A breeze rustled, stealthy, through the glades of the Forest.



CRIMINALIMERICK

THE AMATEUR CRACKSMAN

by D. R. BENSEN

He'll ambush a thug in a thicket;
If he sees a large diamond, he'll nick it;
But his one mortal fear
Is a voice in his ear
Saying, "A. J., old man, that's not cricket."

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Paul J. Orth is currently employed as a computer operator in Fresno, California. His hobbies include "reading and collecting mysteries, listening to good music, and song writing." He had some extremely complimentary things to say about EQ and EQMM, but we are too embarrassed, and self-conscious, to quote them.

So—

'Twas the week before Christmas . . .

THE HEIST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

by PAUL J. ORTH

'Twas the week before Christmas, and I was dead broke.
Not two bits to draw one, and that ain't no joke.
With Jake in the slammer and Ed on the lam,
I tried for a sawbuck from old cellmate Sam.
Said Sam, "I'm as flat as the feet on the fuzz,
But I'll dream up a caper." And that's what he does.
He said, "There's a liquor store just down the street.
It's ripe for the pickin's, the haul will be sweet."
Around about midnight of Christmas Eve night,
The old guy'd be closing, would put up no fight.
The till would be bulging with greenbacks, that's clear,
From last-minute shoppers for bottled Yule cheer.
The rest of the week my spirits were high.
Could they guess the reason—the squares who walked by?
I slept like a babe in my cold-water pad.
While visions of easy bread polkaed like mad.
The big night arrived, the witching hour neared.

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We moved on the gent with the Santa Claus beard.
He worked all alone, so the heist would be easy.
Yet little things made me begin to feel queasy.
As Sam scooped the dough and I leveled the rod,
The whiskery one seemed to give a slight nod.
He looked too athletic to be an old geezer.
A name came to mind—it was not Ebenezer!
A glint in his eye and a twist of his head
Soon gave me to fear I had plenty to dread.
Said Sam, "What's the matter?" I said, "Use your eyes.
That old fud is Ellery Queen in disguise!"
Then out from the street there arose such a clamor,
It resembled the riot last year in the slammer.
We sprang from the door, the Great Man in pursuit,
Plunged into the night and abandoned the loot.
Then what, to our wondering eyes, should appear,
But eight black-and-whites and toward us they did steer.
From all sides the heat, in their cruisers, they came.
A birdlike Inspector roared at them by name:
"On, Johnson! On, Ritter! Flint—cordon the street!
On, Velie! You want to be pounding a beat?"
The fuzz flashed the bracelets and snapped them quickly.
I glared back at Sam, but he just looked sickly.
And I heard Queen exclaim 'ere they hauled us away,
"When will these hoods learn that crime doesn't pay?"

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a NEW "library fuzz" story by

JAMES HOLDING

Hal Johnson is a library cop. He tracks down overdue books and collects the fines. An unexciting pursuit of petty crime? Dull plodding investigation? Don't you believe it. This particular case began with an innocent-looking bookmark and ended with a burst of fireworks . . .

THE BOOKMARK

by JAMES HOLDING

Being in the business I'm in—chasing down stolen and overdue books for the public library—I could almost write a book myself on the crazy things people use for bookmarks. Pornographic postcards, hairpins, dog-show ribbons, stalks of celery, marijuana cigarettes. You wouldn't believe the variety. I even found one teen-ager using the dried skin of a six-inch coral snake. So there was nothing very remarkable about the bookmark I found in Miss Linda Halstrom's overdue library book. At least, I didn't think so at the time.

Miss Halstrom was the third on my list of overdues that day. She lived on the north side in a rundown apartment house that was really an old Victorian mansion converted into a dozen efficiencies. The neighborhood had long since lost its pristine elegance, if any.

I walked up three flights of rubber-treaded stairs to her apartment and knocked on her door, wiping my forehead with an already sodden handkerchief. The outdoor temperature that July day must have been over ninety. The third-floor landing was dark and dreary-looking and smelled of stale cooking, which made Miss Linda Halstrom, when she answered my knock, seem all the more entrancing to me.

She was dressed in white stretch slacks and a man's shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and looked very cool indeed on such a hot day. Her long,

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straight blonde hair framed a blue-eyed, high-cheekboned face that now wore an inquiring smile. It was downright refreshing just to look at her.

"Yes?" she asked me brightly in a cool contralto.

"Miss Linda Halstrom?" I countered.

She nodded.

I showed her my identification card. "I'm from the public library," I said. "Our records show that you have some library books overdue, Miss Halstrom. I've called to collect the books and the fines you owe."

A lot of book borrowers get quite indignant at me, for some reason, when I appear at their doors to take back the public library's property. Maybe it's because they feel the library is questioning their integrity by sending me around. Or maybe it's because people tend to resent any kind of police these days—even a library cop like me.

Miss Halstrom, however, was hospitality itself. She apologized profusely for keeping the books so long beyond their due dates. "Come in, Mr. Johnson," she invited. "I have the books right here."

I followed her into her combination living room-bedroom. The bed, along the far wall, was neatly made up into a daybed, covered with a gayly striped bedspread and strewn with colorful pillows. Everything in the place was as clean and refreshing as Miss Halstrom herself. She pointed to a coffee table by the daybed. "There they are," she said, "three of them. Right?"

"Three is correct." I picked up the library books and checked them against my list. "You'll have to pay the fine."

She shrugged prettily. "My own fault," she said. "I lent them to a friend and forgot all about when they were due. How much is the fine?"

I told her the amount. "I'll get my purse," she said, and headed for a closet at the other end of the room while I went through my standard procedure of shaking her three books upside down to see if she'd left anything between the pages.

A small slip of white paper fluttered to the floor from the third book, a suspense story called *The Hub of the Wheel*. The paper landed on the carpet face up, and as I stooped to retrieve it I noted automatically what seemed to be a telephone number written on it in black ink. I picked up the paper and put it on Miss Halstrom's coffee table.

Miss Halstrom found her purse on the closet shelf, crossed the room to me, and

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counted out the money for her fine. I took it, gathered up her overdue books, and left. I was reluctant to exchange her cool presence for the stifling heat of the streets. But a job's a job.

Going down her stairs, between the second and third floors, I brushed past a short swarthy man in a neat gray suit who was going up. Then I was out in the street again, reaching for my damp handkerchief to resume mopping operations.

I negotiated two blocks of steaming sidewalk between Miss Halstrom's apartment house and my parked car, unlocked the trunk compartment, and fitted her three library books into a big carton. Then I climbed behind the wheel, fired up, and went on about my business.

On my next call I picked up four overdue books from the janitor of a funeral home and came panting back to my car once again, fishing in my pocket for my car keys. I stooped to unlock the trunk and only then realized that this time I wouldn't need a key. Because the trunk was already unlocked. And the lid gaped open about two inches.

Since I'm often careless about locking my trunk, this wouldn't have bothered me at all, except that the trunk lock was twisted out of shape, and the lid showed definite evidence that a prying tool had been used to force it.

Well, the rifling of locked car trunks has become a favorite outdoor sport of the "disadvantaged" these days, they tell me, so I wasn't too surprised at becoming another victim. I lifted the trunk lid and saw that my carton of books was still there. To the casual eye it looked completely undisturbed.

But my eye is not a casual one; I have an extremely good visual memory. And I distinctly remembered that I had fitted Miss Halstrom's three overdue books into my carton with a novel called *Brainstorm* on top. Now the top title was *The Hub of the Wheel*, and *Brainstorm* had been demoted to the second place in the stack.

I transferred all the books from the trunk to the back seat of the car, tied the trunk lid down with a piece of cord, and got behind the wheel again, reflecting ruefully that my trunk lock had been destroyed to no purpose. For it was obvious that whoever had broken into my trunk, on finding nothing but a box of library books (used) for his trouble, had idly glanced over some of the titles and then departed in disgust to try for richer spoils elsewhere. A nuisance. But my insurance

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would take care of the damage to the lock.

At noon I went back to the library and turned in the books and the fines I had collected, ate my lunch in the library cafeteria, and had barely got settled at the desk in my tiny office to plan the afternoon's work when my phone rang. Annie, on the library switchboard, said, "Hal, some girl has been trying to get you for an hour. Where've you been?"

"Eating lunch," I said. "Who was she?"

"A Miss Halstrom. I told her you'd call her back when you came in."

I felt a small thrill of pleasure. "What are you waiting for then?" I asked Annie.

When Miss Halstrom's contralto came on the line it sounded different. Not so cool and refreshing now. In fact, it sounded on the edge of panic. It said, "Mr. Johnson?"

"Yes?"

"Are you the man who collected my overdue library books this morning?"

I assured her I was.

"Oh, thank goodness!" she said. "Will you please do me a favor, Mr. Johnson?"

I said gallantly, "Just ask me, Miss Halstrom."

"Well, there was a bookmark in one of my library books, with a telephone number on it, Mr. Johnson. And I have to get it back, please. It's very important. It was in the book called *The Hub of the Wheel.* Do you remember that book?"

"Sure," I said. "And it did have a bookmark in it. But I left the bookmark on your coffee table this morning."

"The coffee table!" Her voice held the beginnings of relief. "Are you sure? Please, wait'll I look, will you please?"

In a moment she was back on the line. "It's there, Mr. Johnson! Oh, how can I thank you? I'm so *dumb*! I put my purse right down on top of it when I was paying you the money for my fine this morning. No wonder we didn't see it. My boy friend was furious with me!"

"Boy friend?" I tried to keep disappointment out of my voice.

In her relief she chattered exuberantly on. "I *told* you this morning I'd lent the books to a friend. Well, it was my *boy* friend, and the bookmark with the telephone number on it was *his*, not mine. I didn't even know it was in the book until he came in this morning right after you left and asked for that book because he'd remembered he'd left an important telephone number in it. And I told him you'd just left with the books, so he ran out after you

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to see if he could reach you and get his bookmark back, but he couldn't find you, so he told me to get that telephone number back for him somehow or I'd be sorry."

She took a deep breath. "And now I've got it, and the whole silly thing was just because of my dumbness!" She laughed. "I'm sorry I bothered you, Mr. Johnson. But I've never seen Jerry so upset!" She hung up.

I remembered the short swarthy fellow I'd passed on her stairway that morning. He must have been Miss Halstrom's boy friend and evidently had an ugly temper. And obviously the man was pitifully unworthy of Miss Linda Halstrom, the Scandinavian goddess who had brightened my morning.

It was late the next afternoon before I got around to calling my insurance man to tell him about the broken lock of my car trunk. He said, "Get it fixed and send the bill to me. You've reported it to the police, of course?"

"No. What's the use? Nothing was taken."

"Do it anyway," he told me. "It has to be on the official record before we can pay any claim on it."

"I'm police," I said. "Don't I count?"

"You're just sissy unofficial fuzz," he said. "Report it downtown if you want us to pay the bill."

So on my way home that evening I stopped off at police headquarters and asked to see Lieutenant Randall. I'd worked for several years in the plainclothes division under Randall before I took my library job.

Randall was sitting in his office behind a perfectly clear desk, chewing gently on a stogie and regarding the world sleepily through his yellow cat's eyes. He greeted me with a wave of his hand. "Hi, Hal," he said blandly. "You run into some crime at the public library that you can't handle by yourself?"

Just as blandly I answered, "No, Lieutenant. And if I need help I wouldn't come here for it. I understand the only good detective you ever had in this department resigned five years ago."

Randall grinned. "So what do you want?"

"To report a break-in."

"My, my! Whose?"

"Mine. Somebody jimmied the trunk lid of my car between 10:30 and 10:45 yesterday morning while I was parked in the 9200 block of Cook Street on the north side."

"Anything stolen?" asked Randall placidly.

"No. But my insurance man

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won't pay for repairs unless I report the thing officially."

"Okay," Randall said. "You've reported it. You don't expect us to find the culprit, do you?"

"No way."

"Unless," said Randall, very bland again, "the only good detective we ever had in this department can give us a clue to work on."

I grinned and started to shake my head. Then I said, "Wait a minute, Lieutenant. Maybe I *do* have a clue for you." For echoing in my mind, suddenly and for no reason, was the contralto voice of Miss Linda Halstrom saying to me over the phone: ". . . so he ran out after you to see if he could catch you and get his bookmark back, but he couldn't find you. . ."

I told Lieutenant Randall about the bookmark business. "So it's barely possible, isn't it," I asked him when I'd finished, "that Miss Halstrom's boy friend didn't try to catch me at all, but instead followed me in his car until I parked, then jimmied open my trunk, looking for his telephone number? And didn't find it? For the only books that showed signs of having been moved in my carton were two of Miss Halstrom's books."

Randall laughed. "Some clue! Why would this boy friend do a thing like that? When he could have just asked you for the bookmark?"

"Maybe he didn't want me to notice the telephone number?"

"Why not?"

"How do I know? But he obviously considered the number important enough to come down hard on poor Miss Halstrom for unknowingly giving it to me."

"If he couldn't remember the number, why not look it up again? Or ask Information for it?"

"Maybe it was an unlisted number."

Randall blew smoke. "Do *you* remember it? You used to be good at that."

I closed my eyes and visualized the slip of paper staring up at me from Miss Halstrom's carpet yesterday. "Yeah," I said. I tore a sheet off Randall's desk pad and wrote on it: *Cal 928-4791.*

Randall looked at what I'd written. "What's the 'Cal'?"

"Layman's shorthand for 'Call,' I guess."

Randall put his stogie on a battered ashtray, asked for an outside line, and dialed the number. He held his telephone receiver a couple of inches away from his ear so I could hear the distant ringing.

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After only one ring someone picked up the receiver. A woman's voice said, "Yes?"

Randall murmured into the phone, "Is this the Peckinpaugh residence, please?"

"No," said the voice. "Wrong number." And there was a click as she hung up.

"You're losing your charm," I said to Randall.

Unabashed, he waited a moment, then dialed the number again. The same woman's voice answered immediately. "Yes?" This time the question was asked in a tight controlled tone, highly charged with either anxiety or anger.

Randall said, "Who is this, please?"

"Will you kindly stay off this line?" the woman said sharply. "I'm expecting an important call." And she hung up again.

"Why didn't you tell her who you are?" I asked Randall.

"I didn't get a chance." Grimly he dialed the number once more, and when the woman answered he said sternly, "Now don't hang up, lady, this is the police calling."

This pronouncement was greeted by an exclamation that was part wail, part sob. "The police! But we don't *want* the police! Will you please stop tying up this line?" And another click.

Randall's yellow eyes turned thoughtful. "'But we don't *want* the police'," he murmured. "An odd turn of phrase, wouldn't you say, Hal?"

"I would. And she sounded quite upset."

He pushed his phone across the desk to me. "You try it," he said. I began to dial. He said, "Wait." He was looking at the memo sheet with the telephone number on it. "What if this 'Cal' doesn't mean 'Call'? What if it's a name? Like short for Calvin, or Calhoun, or something?"

That hadn't occurred to me. I nodded. "I'll try it." I dialed the number.

This time, when the receiver was lifted at the other end, I got in first. "Is Cal there?" I asked brightly.

A sharp intake of breath came clearly over the wire. Then, "Thank God!" The woman's voice sounded faint and weak. "Is she all right? You haven't hurt her, have you?" A gulp. Then, with more control, "I'm doing exactly as you said. I'll have the money ready tomorrow, as soon as the banks open. . ."

Randall was leaning over his desk toward me, listening intently to the small voice at the other end of the wire. I looked into his cat's eyes and raised my eyebrows. He shook

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his head violently. I said into the telephone, "Isn't Calvin Brown there? Isn't this 928-3791?"—deliberately giving the wrong number.

Her words stopped as though I'd turned off a faucet.

Randall nodded at me and I said hurriedly, "I'm sorry. I must have dialed it wrong. Excuse it, please," and hung up.

Lieutenant Randall leaned back slowly in his chair. "How do you like that?" he said softly.

I said, "Are you going to barge in on it? She was terrified of police."

"Not at her end. I want to know who she is, though. And Cal, too."

An official police demand brought us the information from the telephone company that unlisted number 928-4791 was assigned to a Mrs. Wilson A. Benedict on Waterside Drive.

I whistled. "She can afford to pay the ransom, I guess. She's the widow of Wilson Benedict, the bank president, isn't she?"

Randall didn't answer. He was already calling the Obituary editor of the *Evening News* who informed us, after he located the clipping in his files, that Wilson A. Benedict, when killed in an auto accident the year before, had been survived by his wife, two college-age sons, and a four-year-old daughter named Callie.

"Callie," Randall said, picking up his stogie. "She must be our Cal. Let's go see your Miss Halstrom."

I was already on my feet. "Right," I said, just as though I still worked for him.

Five minutes after we found her partaking of a late dinner in her apartment on the north side, Randall had extracted the following information from a distressed but cooperative Miss Halstrom. Item: her boy friend's name was Jerry Gates. Item: he was chauffeur-handyman for a wealthy family named Carson on Waterside Drive and lived in their garage apartment. Item: the Carsons were on vacation in the mountains. Item: Jerry Gates was going to marry Linda Halstrom as soon as he got the large legacy he was expecting from an uncle who had died while Jerry was serving as a medic in Vietnam several years ago, before Jerry had even met Linda. And item: the telephone number on his missing bookmark, according to Jerry, was that of the lawyer, name unknown, whom he was supposed to call to find out when he could expect his legacy.

Well, that was enough information for Randall. We left Halstrom weeping into her

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cold TV dinner and took off for Waterside Drive. En route Randall called headquarters and ordered reinforcements to meet us. He wanted to leave me out of it, but he couldn't waste time arguing, so I went along.

When the reinforcements arrived, there were six of us, counting me, a small army.

As it turned out we didn't need that many, but we didn't know that till later. It was full dark by the time we reached Waterside Drive. A promise of coming coolness was faintly detectable in the overheated July air. We drove past the stone entrance pillars twice before we left the cars a block away and drifted back, in shifts of two, trying to look inconspicuous as we ducked inside and melted into the gloom of the trees that lined the drive.

When we were all there, gathered in the dense shadow of a huge sycamore, Randall looked over the setup. The enormous turn-of-the-century house, covered with gingerbread scrollwork that was faintly visible to us in the starlight, squatted at the end of the driveway like an obscene insect. Not a single light shone in it. Off to the right, maybe 30 yards from the house and placed out of sight from the street, was an old-fashioned two-car garage, originally a carriage house in all probability, with the chauffeur's quarters above it. We could see a light shining from the front windows of the garage apartment.

Randall pointed to the light. "That's it," he whispered. He looked up at the gnarled limbs of the sycamore that sheltered us and said, "O'Neill, get up in this tree with your field glasses and see what you can see."

We waited then in complete silence, broken only by the scrape of shoe leather on rough tree bark, while O'Neill climbed the tree. Every few feet he'd stop and take a look through the field glasses to see if he was high enough to get a view into the lighted windows of the chauffeur's quarters. Finally he settled on a thick branch about 25 feet up and trained his glasses on the windows for several minutes without moving.

"Well?" asked Randall as O'Neill came sliding down the tree.

"One guy," said O'Neill, barely loud enough to be audible. "Sitting in an easy chair reading the newspaper. The *Evening News*."

"Could you see the whole room? Only one guy? You're sure?"

O'Neill nodded. "I'm sure."

Randall shook his head. "One doesn't seem enough."

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"Maybe there are guards outside," I suggested.

"You keep out of this," Randall told me. Then, to two of the others, "Jim, make a circuit of the house. And you, Lew, take the garage. No noise, you hear? Just see if you can locate any guards around. And if you do, fade out. Come back here. Don't take any aggressive action of your own. Understood?"

Jim and Lew slid away without a word. We waited again. I needed a cigarette. But then, so did the others, probably. Twenty minutes crept by. O'Neill was up in the tree again, keeping in view the man reading the newspaper in the garage apartment.

"No guards that we could see," Jim reported when he and Lew rejoined us.

"Huh!" said Randall. He seemed disappointed. "Only one guy. Any other lights visible?"

"None in the main house," Jim said.

"And only in the garage in that front room upstairs," Lew said. "The back windows are dark. Or back window, rather. There's only one."

Up in the tree O'Neill spoke. "The guy's getting up from his chair. Going to a door at the back end of the room. Opening it. Going through. It's a little hallway. He's gone now."

Randall nodded. "Come on down, O'Neill." He turned to Lew. "Any place behind the garage where we can look through that rear window with the glasses?"

"Yeah," Lew answered. "A tree bigger than this one. Except there's no light."

"Come on," Randall muttered, and we followed him as silently as we could toward the garage, clinging to the shadows. At the foot of the outside staircase that led up to the garage apartment Randall said, "Lew and Jim. Stay here in the angle of the wall until I tell you different. O'Neill, take the garage doors—there might be an inside exit. Shenkin. Under the back window. Nail anybody who tries to get out of that upstairs apartment. Got it? And Hal," he said, "you come with me."

I nodded. Randall took the field glasses from O'Neill and led me quickly around to the back of the garage, Shenkin trailing us and taking position under the back window as instructed.

"I want to see what's in that back room," Randall said to me. He gestured toward the big tree Lew had reported. "Climb up there and give it a try, will you?"

"I'm no tree climber. I

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thought you wanted me out of it?"

"I do. That's why I'm sending you up the tree." His yellow eyes glittered in the starlight. "Get going." He tilted his head to look up at the rear window. "Maybe reflected light from the front room will show you something."

"And if I see anything?"

"If you see enough to show you we're right about this screwy deal, whistle. We'll take it from there."

I climbed up the tree as silently as I could manage it.

I sat with the glasses trained on the small rear window of the garage apartment for ten long minutes before I could report anything to Randall below. Then a door opened and a path of light cut into the darkness of the back room I was watching. The shaft of light began at the opening door and ended at a bed on the left side of the room. A girl lay on the bed, sleeping.

I whistled softly. Immediately I could hear Randall taking off and running hard for the front of the garage. In another moment the sound of rushing feet on wooden steps thundered in the night, and Randall's voice, perfectly clear to me up in my tree, shouted, "Open up! This is the police!"

I kept my glasses trained on the man who had entered the back room. Randall's shout caught him just as he bent over the sleeping girl. He straightened galvanically. He cast one incredulous look toward the front of the garage, then turned and came charging directly toward me.

With hands and arms stiffened before him to protect his head, he hit the rear window of the room in a long horizontal dive that carried away window glass, sash, and sticks of frame. It was like watching a TV detective leap through a breakaway window. In the midst of the window explosion the man tumbled out into the night air 15 feet above the unprepared head of Shenkin, dutifully parked under that back window.

I yelled, "Shenkin! Watch out below!" But it was too late. Shenkin looked up, jerked right, then left, trying to avoid the falling object. He failed. The man's hurtling body landed feet first on Shenkin's head and shoulders and drove him to the ground as effectively as a pile driver.

Transfixed for a few seconds in my tree, I waited for Shenkin to move. He didn't. He was out cold. And the man who had leaped from the window—Jerry Gates presumably—was in little better condition. He seemed

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badly shaken by his fall. It took him roughly forty seconds to stagger to his feet, look around him muzzily, and set off again, straight toward my tree.

By that time I was heedlessly removing square inches of hide from my arms and ankles, shinnying down my tree backward as fast as I could slide without going into free fall. The field glasses hung from my neck on their strap and set up a clatter as they bumped against the tree trunk during my hasty descent.

A reverberating crash from the front of the garage informed me that Randall and Jim and Lew had broken down the front door of the apartment. I was aware of this only on the fringe of my attention which was centered strongly now on Jerry Gates. He was running toward me unsteadily as I reached the foot of my tree.

I was in deep shadow there. He didn't see me. So I did the only thing I could think of to stop him. I swung Randall's heavy field glasses on the end of their carrying strap once around my head for momentum, like a cowboy twirling a rope, and let them fly.

They caught the fugitive just above the right temple, making a thump of their own to add to the assorted violent sounds of that night. And he went down for the count even more gracefully than poor unlucky Shenkin.

When Randall burst through into the garage apartment's back room a moment later, with his gun out, he found that little Callie Benedict had slept peacefully through all the fireworks.

The next day the police were heroes in the newspapers and on TV. For when little Callie was returned, unharmed and without payment of the ransom, Mrs. Benedict couldn't say enough nice things about "those marvelous policemen." I was mentioned in the news reports as a former cop who had inadvertently alerted the police to the kidnaping during a routine report of a car break-in. They didn't even mention my name.

Lieutenant Randall called me at the library at noon. "We got the story out of Gates," he said. "I'll fill you in. The only solo kidnaping attempt in my experience. Living next door to the kidnap victim made it almost work for him."

"How'd Gates grab the girl?" I asked.

"She's got a pet rabbit in a hutch by the hedge that forms the boundary line between the Benedicts and the Carsons.

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Every afternoon at five o'clock the kid goes out to feed her rabbit. So Gates just reached through the hedge from his side, slapped a chloroform pad over the kid's face, and carried her up to his garage apartment. Then he gave her a shot of drugs to keep her out of it until he collected the ransom from her mother. He swears he was going to turn her loose—unharmed, of course. And he was counting on Mrs. Benedict's promise not to call us in. Any questions?"

"Where'd he get the unlisted phone number?"

"Three weeks ago in a bar after a few drinks with a guy who used to be the Benedicts' chauffeur."

"And 'Cal' was a code word to identify the kidnaper to Mrs. Benedict?"

"Yeah."

"Okay," I said. "No more questions. But I've got a big fat complaint."

"Let me guess. Your feelings are hurt because we didn't give you a fair share of glory in the public prints, right?"

"It would have been great publicity for the library."

"And for you, too, hey?"

"You could have given them my name, at least. It wouldn't have hurt you any."

Randall chuckled. "It wouldn't have hurt *me*, no. But it would have hurt the department, Hal."

"For God's sake! How?"

"Well"—Lieutenant Randall was at his blandest—"don't you think it might destroy public confidence in the police department if I let it be publicly known that the only real *good* detective we ever had in the department resigned five years ago?"

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THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

This month, it must be acknowledged with regret, your mentor has floundered through worse than the customary shortage of good books.

"If not four worthy new items," I said to myself at first, "surely there'll be three?" Oh, no. "Two, then?" rang the silent cry. "It's never failed; we're bound to get at least two." But we weren't. "One, anyway! One measly book, one solitary title, to raise above the flood?" And then there were none.

There seems only one way out of this *impasse.* Some time ago I devoted an entire column to the late Anthony Berkeley Cox, an English friend who wrote both as Anthony Berkeley and as Francis Iles. The effort was well received; several correspondents asked for more reassessments of the same kind. And so, under the present circumstances, let's glance back at an American mystery writer who bulked large on the horizon forty years ago: Willard Huntington Wright (1888-1939), fictionally known as S.S. Van Dine.

By profession an art and literary critic, plagued with constant ill-health, in the mid-1920s our protagonist planned a series of six detective novels. Each should have its formula title, the words "Murder Case" preceded by some descriptive term of six letters. Each as its amateur detective should feature Manhattan's anglicized aristocrat and self-conscious intellectual—debonair, erudite Philo Vance.

Vance might prove a financial winner. Investigating psychologically, scorning all material clues, he would assist District Attorney Markham and doughty Sergeant Heath of Homicide.

Well, Van Dine had guessed right. Published by Scribners in 1926, *The Benson Murder Case* made an immediate hit. Its successor, *The "Canary" Murder Case*, boomed to still larger sales. Spouting learned lectures, Vance progressed through *The Greene Murder Case*, *The Bishop Murder Case*, and *The Scarab Murder Case*, five novels of the proposed half dozen. With book rights,

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with serial rights, with film rights for a relentless mill, Vance's creator grew rich and famous at the time of the Great Depression.

He might have stopped after *The Kennel Murder Case*, his sixth. By this time it was impossible to stop; the game had become too profitable. From whatever cause, perhaps poor health combined with the ghoulish influence of films, his hand faltered thereafter. He had chronicled a dozen cases when he died in '39. But, despite effective touches, real power had gone. His last two efforts seemed little more than querulous self-parody, an embarrassment to those of us who had admired.

Certain critics had always belittled the author because they disliked this particular sleuth. They whooped with glee at Vance's mannerisms or his pseudo-Oxonian speech, although he carried it off as well as a genuine British product beloved by critics, H. D. Bailey's Reggie Fortune. They ridiculed the aesthete both when he talked aesthetics and when he forsook talk for action. "Philo Vance," they sang with the versifier, "needs a kick in the pance." And too often, in that monotonous refrain, they ignored the strength of the story.

It is time for some more honest appraisal.

Now Van Dine knew his job. Ingenuity he had, adaptability—several ideas he found in Gross's textbook, *Criminal Investigation*—as well as a vivid sense of character and immense narrative skill. He did nothing at random. Vance's cultural lectures, by enemies condemned as extraneous, were in fact carefully crafted into the book's texture and plan.

Judge him at his best. Try *The Greene Murder Case*, an epic of family slaughter in a decayed old mansion above the East River; try *The Bishop Murder Case*, which celebrates further mass homicide among mathematicians in the West Seventies. Both are brilliant; and the latter, with such sinister nursery overtones, must rank among the best detective novels ever written.

My own generation has its sentimental memories. As Sherlock Holmes belonged to boyhood, Philo Vance (far from effete, this fellow!) set a pattern for young men of the world. That Philo so often defeated the New York police troubled us no more than that Sherlock made a monkey of Scotland Yard. The light of youth illumines both. Final analysis, it may be, will find Vance, Markham, and Heath not unworthy to drink a toast with Holmes and Watson as they all sit together in their Valhalla beyond the stars.

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a NEW crime story by

RICHARD A. SELZER

The "pure" detective-mystery can be divided into three parts—the whodunit, the howdunit, and the whydunit (in order of their chronological development). In this newest crime story by Richard A. Selzer there is no mystery about the "who"—we know from the beginning who the murderer is. Nor is the "why" a mystery—we know why a Professor of Assyriology wants to kill his best friend. But the "how," although clearly disclosed, is unusual, novel. To the best of our recollection this particular modus operandi has never been used before . . .

THE ELEMENTAL TRUTH

by RICHARD A. SELZER

"It is all arranged," Clement thought. "Williamson, the swine, is to be destroyed today, at exactly four forty-five in the afternoon. But he is not a swine, not any more. He has been raised to the status of Victim, and that is a holy position equal in all respects to me. Is not the deer corollary to and counterpart of the hunter? Necessary to him? And without whom the life of the other is absurd?"

What's more, no one would suspect Clement of murder. Imagine, two old Emeritus Professors of Assyriology. Who would guess at the hatred, the rivalry? Both of them with their wrinkles and their white mustaches, their saggy trousers and their stale jokes.

"Good morning, Hans," Williamson would say, "what's new?"

"What's old, you mean," Clement would retort, and the two Babylonians would laugh as if for the first rather than the thousandth time. Then Clement would turn to whoever else was present and explain, "Williamson and I don't care what's

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new. We only go up to 500 B.C." Then it was their turn to laugh again.

Clement had come to the university two years before Williamson, 27 years ago. He was happy when the department was able to persuade Williamson to come to the university, too. After all, building a good department was the main thing, and who had a better reputation in Hittite and Sanskrit than Williamson?

In the beginning they strolled about the campus arm in arm, vibrating in the same wavelength, floating belly up on the river of their mutual enthusiasm. They dedicated books to each other. *To Hans Clement, friend, example, and teacher.* Or: *To Peter Williamson, scholar par excellence, friend without whose teaching none of this would have been possible.*

Each called the other's house his own. They virtually lived in each other's offices. Williamson sat with Clement's wife at the hospital the night Clement had his gallbladder taken out. Williamson made wine in his basement one year, everything by hand, and insisted that Clement take half of it. He said it would be an honor, and besides, why should he poison his liver all by himself and leave the whole field of Assyriology to Clement?

"Little did I dream," Clement thought, "that what I had envisioned as the ideal of friendship, even of love, if you will permit me—for I loved Williamson, truly loved him—was in fact an asp on my bosom. An asp that lay coiled and waiting to strike for the twenty-five years of our association at this university. But I have won. I will have crushed the serpent a split second before it thrust its lightning into my flesh. That evil bullet-head will lie split beneath my heel.

"I say that he was evil, that he was devious, conniving, that he took me for a simplistic fool. That is all true. While I, in the blankness of innocence, poured into his willing ear the secrets of my imagination, the breadth of my research and thought, he, with a perfidy born of ambition, stored each idea of mine for his own use, and began to write at the same time his own history of the Ancient Middle East.

"He, Williamson the Cheat, stole from me my most precious jewels—my ideas. That which I said to him in the afternoon he wrote on paper in the night, embellished by his own style."

Clement had discovered the truth six months ago. The discovery was like an explosion in his brain. He had gone to Wil-

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liamson's office for the morning coffee they usually took together. He had put the water up to boil on the hotplate and was idly thumbing through a journal reprint on Williamson's desk. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a carbon copy of a fat manuscript at the bottom of a pile of papers, artfully concealed by a nonchalant arrangement of books. He withdrew the manuscript from the pile and saw to his surprise that it was the text of a book entitled *A History and Interpretation of Babylon* by Peter Williamson.

Clement had known nothing of this enterprise. With mounting excitement, and still unaware of his injury, he turned to the first page of text. It was all too familiar. In a fever he raced through the first chapter. His! All his! Everything he had thought, everything he had told Williamson. The next chapter as well. Then quickly he turned to the end. Again and again he saw his thoughts phrased in the other's voice.

He might have fainted or undergone a seizure, so far did his brain float away from his body. When he returned to himself, Williamson was standing in the doorway, a shy little smile cracking the parchment of his face.

"I was going to surprise you," he said, "but you beat me to it. Oh, well, it's all for the best. I want you to read the manuscript and give me your opinion."

Clement had never felt such a sourness in his mouth, such a rancid taste. It was all he could do to keep from leaping on the thief then and there and taking his justice.

"The Lord was with me," he thought, "and sent me the self-control to delay, to match Williamson's perfidy with artfulness and subterfuge."

He replaced the manuscript on the desk, and congratulated Williamson both on his scholarship and on his ability to keep a secret from his best friend for such a long time.

"That I remained in his office," Clement thought, "and even drank his coffee is a tribute to human endurance, a veritable triumph of anatomy and physiology over the psyche."

From that moment Clement was consumed with the need for revenge. He had, in fact, become young again. He had discovered the elemental truth that in old age it is Hate and not Love that rejuvenates.

"With Love," he thought, "I have grown slovenly, decrepit, comfortable perhaps, nevertheless fading toward quiet disappearance. Now I am strong, bristling with urges, restless again, and it is Hate that has

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restored me. I understand that it is a positive thing, that it will lead me to revenge and therefore to justice."

For months he had planned the events of that afternoon with a singleness of purpose that bordered on the fanatic. From the beginning he had resolved to kill Williamson. But how? Despite the pressure of his newfound energies, Clement knew that there must be no physical violence. His dignity had always been important to him, and he would not throw it away even to realize his dearest wish. Besides, the picture of two antiques grappling and rolling on the ground was utterly distasteful, esthetically wrong. Clement would be refined in his revenge as in all other acts in his life.

Ironically, he was in the company of Williamson when the method of murder was revealed to him.

"Revealed to me," Clement thought, "because I am convinced that my hand is being guided in this matter by the Gods, perhaps even the very Baal or Ra about whom the victim and I have uncovered so many facts."

They were leaving the stacks of the Rare Book Library, after a morning spent translating some Arabic manuscripts for a joint paper they were to present in the spring. As they were about to step from the elevator Clement saw, really saw, what he must have seen a hundred times but never "experienced." It was a rather large sign on the back wall of the elevator—red letters on a white background. AT THE SIGNAL THIS AREA WILL BE FLOODED WITH CARBON DIOXIDE. YOU MUST LEAVE WITHIN TWO MINUTES.

It was as though fingers were gently drawn across Clement's brow. The idea was as palpable as that. He stood in the elevator staring at the sign and its message until Williamson, holding the door, spoke.

"Come, come, what are you waiting for?"

Clement turned abruptly and followed Williamson out. What, indeed, was he waiting for? It would not be long now. It required all his strength to control the elation flooding him until he could part company with Williamson.

The library! Of course! It was perfect. The building had been referred to in architectural circles as a jewel box. And so it was. The walls were of highly grained Vermont marble through which the sunlight passed to illuminate the interior in a rich everchanging glow. At sunset the walls turned red as blood. In the rain they were

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pale green. Truly one of the wonders of the world.

The central portion of the building from floor to ceiling, and extending below the surface of the ground for three floors, was occupied by the glass-encased stacks, the sanctum sanctorum, housing the priceless collection of rare books. Within these stacks elaborate devices controlled the temperature and humidity, which must be optimum for the preservation of such treasures. Only designated scholars had access to these stacks, and each was furnished with a key which must be used to open the single door, both from within and without. Williamson and Clement were among that number.

To learn the mechanics of the fire-prevention device it was necessary to "look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under't."

"It has been said of me," thought Clement, "that I possess both the kingly and the common touch, and, immodestly, it is true. I have the ability to approach men of all classes and levels of intelligence, and gain their confidence."

Therefore he selected as the person to teach him the intricacies of the fire-alarm system, and to become unwitting accomplice to his deed, Reilly, a guard at the library. Clement had nodded to him each morning for several years. Now he stopped, chatted, asked after Reilly's health, and that of his family. They spoke of the weather and the students, and all manner of Reilly's preferences. In everything Clement hastened to agree with Reilly's opinions. So it was not long before they were old chums, and it was only a matter of time when, at Clement's subtle request, Reilly agreed eagerly to explain the mechanism. They descended to the lowest level of the stacks.

"Here it is," Reilly said, "the beatin' heart of the whole system."

They were standing before a large wall panel covered with knobs and dials labeled with such legends as SMOKE DETECTOR, FIRE DETECTOR, CARDOX ACTIVATOR, TAP 1, TAP 2, TAP 3, and many others which seemed, at most, ancillary to Clement's purpose. Reilly explained them all to Clement with the pride of ownership resident only in the hearts of good menials, and with all the care of a kindergarten teacher explaining to a child.

"Here's how it works," said Reilly. "The whole thing is automatic. The very first hint of smoke or flame is picked up by this sensitive apparatus and the thing is set in motion. The

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alarm goes off, giving the two minutes' notice to anyone in the stacks. At the same time the alarm is heard at the Fire Department and by the police. At the end of two minutes the exhaust system sucks all the oxygen out of the area, and the pumps push in the carbon dioxide."

"But, Mr. Reilly," Clement said, "what would happen to someone who didn't get out? Maybe he didn't hear the alarm, or had fallen asleep. You know, such things happen." He was smiling, casual, with just a hint of mild outrage in his voice.

"Well, I regret to inform you, Professor, that he wouldn't last very long."

Clement thought, "I loved that 'I regret to inform you.' Just the right elegiac note."

"How long would you say? Just a guess, of course."

"He'd be unconscious in two minutes and his brain would be damaged in four. After another two minutes he wouldn't be worth rescuing."

"Brain damage!" Clement thought. "Delicious!"

The stage was set. Clement now knew all he needed to know. It was only a matter of selecting the proper moment for execution.

That moment had arrived. Saturday, the 25th of May. Clement had chosen it carefully, leaving nothing to chance. The students had completed their examinations for the year. The deadline for turning in term papers had been the day before, and the likelihood of anyone but an exceptional slacker being in the library was exceedingly small. Even the hour was protected. 4:45. The building would close fifteen minutes later, and by that time everyone had departed for their weekend revels.

"In five minutes," Clement thought, "I shall put down my pencil and call out to Williamson at the desk just around the corner of the stacks. Be still, my heart. I must be composed. Yet there is such a fierce current running through my body. The sting of it on my skin is all but unbearable. I can wait no longer. Let it be done."

"Peter!" he called. "It's time to quit. The manuscripts will still be here on Monday. So the world will have to wait two more days for our books."

Williamson did not answer. Was it possible he was asleep? Clement could not see him.

"Hey, Peter! Bookworm, let's go home."

"All right, Hans, I'll be ready in a few minutes."

"I give you five more minutes, drudge, then I am coming for you."

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"Fine, I'll be ready."

Williamson was a great procrastinator.

"Five minutes to me," Clement thought, "means fifteen minutes to him. Time enough."

Clement was on his feet now, edging toward the only door. Just to the left of it and at eye level was the opening of the exhaust system through which the air would be sucked. It was a black oval in the wall, like a mouth in full scream. To the right was the small square grille that Clement knew was a receptor end of the flame detector.

There was a priestly formality in the gesture with which he touched the match to the torch of papers he had made. As he held it aloft to the grille he felt his body straighten, become taller, felt his arm become strong and rigid. He waited for the alarm. There it was! A shrill piercing whine ascended and descended, in perfectly shaped sound waves.

The exhaust was now activated. It had the sound of an interminable last exhalation. Already the insidious miasma of carbon dioxide was flooding the stacks.

It was done. In four minutes the brain damage to Williamson would be an accomplished fact. Now to the door. His key in the lock. Turn. "Come on, don't tremble so. It doesn't turn! Oh, my God! Quickly. Out and start again. No, it doesn't work—he had brought the wrong key! I'm trapped here with him! Pound on the door? No. Someone will find the remains of the torch, and there is no time to dispose of it. I—I—must go to him and confess. I will tell him everything. At least we will die together like old friends."

"Peter—Peter—do you hear? Where are you? Here is his desk. He is gone! I must find him. Please, God, let him not already be dead. It will have come too soon. We have at least a minute left. In a minute there is time—he cannot be far. Peter! *Peter!* No answer.

"What is this on his desk? The original manuscript of *A History and Interpretation of Babylon.* Open to the dedication page which had not been in the carbon copy. *To Hans Clement, the true author of this book.*"

It began inside him. Clement could scarcely breathe. So dizzy.

And there, beneath the dedication:

"This book is no more and no less than a biography of the intellect of Hans Clement, the pre-eminent Eastern Scholar of the Twentieth Century, in whose company I have spent the happiest twenty-five years

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of my life. These pages are filled with his thoughts and ideas. I have merely collected, annotated, and, in a few instances, edited them. P. Williamson."

It was growing dim. Clement's heart pounded so. It leaped like a deer in his throat. Where was the door? He was on the floor! Did he fall? Was that Peter he saw through the small glass panel high in the door? Then Peter was safe!

"It is growing black. I am at the end. Peter . . ."

Men were kneeling beside Clement. He was being touched. He could not see their faces, or sort out their words. They seemed to speak in another language. Was one of them Peter? Now Clement heard Peter's voice. What was he saying?

"When I heard the alarm, I ran out the door. He was closer to it, so I assumed he had already left. Clement must have panicked. Hans—Hans—speak to me. Breathe, Hans! My God, it's too late!"

The sound of Peter weeping . . . fading . . .

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

S. S. Rafferty's "first story" was "Murder by Scalping," in our July 1973 issue. It introduced an unusual detective, Captain Cork, perhaps "the first Colonial op on record." The action took place in the Eighteenth Century in the American Colonies, before the Revolutionary War.

Mr. Rafferty's second story couldn't possibly be more different in time, place, and characterization, in plot, style, and tone. It introduces another unusual detective, Chick Kelly, a medium-time night-club comic who, the author thinks, is Captain Cork's great-great-grandson—but Mr. Rafferty admits he can't prove it, and we are rather glad he can't.

Now, meet the man with an ear . . .

HANG IN; CHICK!

by S. S. RAFFERTY

I've got two rules that I live up to: I never drink until after my midnight performance, and I keep my act contemporary. The road to oblivion is paved with comics who juice it up with guests, and try to ride with the same material year after year. So, like a good little boy, I did my eight o'clock bit, getting a pretty good response for an East Side audience, and beat it back to my dressing room.

I was sitting there playing with a line about Lippes Loops (I don't do blue material, but like I said, I'm contemporary), when the stage manager ushers in two Bond suits in Adams hats. It's got to be "the man," but who's to worry? Chick Kelly is Mr. Clean. I don't keep grass at the club, and I haven't made a bet all week. Then this plainclothes guy lays this kidnaping line on me, and I can see it's going to be a very heavy evening.

Not that they lay it on me right away. First we play Twenty Questions. "What are my Mafia connections?" I've read *The Godfather*. "You play

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Vegas, don't you?" I play Akron, too, but I don't know anyone in the tire business. Then they tell me to stop being a funnyman, and we toss lines at each other for ten minutes. They want to know where I've been in the past few days, etc., etc., etc. It was strictly B-movie dialogue, with me doing a Huntz Hall all the way.

Finally they brought in a third cat, better dressed and younger, who, they announce, is from the FBI. That's "FBI" in ten-foot-high neon—THE F . . . B . . . I. Sweat, baby, sweat. But I'm still very cool. The cool of the innocent until proven guilty. But then he gave me the Medina, and I can see these kids aren't playing for marbles.

So five-year-old Teddy Franklin, they say, is missing. Kidnaped two days ago. No publicity. So the Franklins get a phone call from a guy demanding 100,000 green ones, and he disguises his voice by doing a W. C. Fields imitation. So what? Half of the people in the world can do a W. C. Fields. But Mr. FBI has got news for me, very large news. They got a voice-print of the guy on the phone, and matched it to a flock of comics who play Vegas, and I won the cigar. They even used a track from an album I made a year ago. The album was a dud bomb then, but it was exploding in my face right now. I can see myself getting a first-class ticket on the railroad.

So we move the act to 60th and Third, where the FBI does business, and some more Federal types join the party. Everybody has a script but me. At one point I gave *them* a reading about civil rights and one phone call to a lawyer. It worked for Jimmy Cagney, but not for Chick Kelly. My FBI guy—he wasn't as rough as the others, so I adopted him—just smiled and said that I could make a call in a few minutes. The smile gave me the message. Read "minutes" as "When we get good and ready."

Hang in, Chick.

If you ever wondered why FBI guys have to be lawyers before they make the Federal scene, just drop around and I'll do a whole number on it for you. Every question is loaded. They start out simple enough, then build to a denouement. (Yeah, I read, too.) They start telling me things about myself that I either forgot, wanted to forget, or didn't even know.

Like I once had drinks with Tommy (the Lemon) Algonzo, on March 17, 1970 at the Sahara bar. Of course there were a hundred people at the bar at the time, and being St. Paddy's Day, I wouldn't know if I had a

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drink with St. Francis of Assisi. Then they roll Algonzo's credits: attempted extortion at various times, suspicion of kidnaping in 1948, suspicion of murder in 1955.

I get the whole bag. But there is one snag. Tommy the Lemon has never been convicted of anything. So right away I feel a little better. If these guys can't dump a heavy hitter like that, how in Hannah are they going to stick a small fry like me?

Chick Kelly Rides Again. Attack, man, attack. So I do a Patton.

What's with this voiceprint they seem to be in love with? Can I see it? It might have been a bad move, because my FBI guy is more than happy to do just that. Bango! I'm looking at a split screen with two charts that looks like a television set with a hangover. Only they don't look like a perfect match to me, and I say so. Up gets a Fordham Law alumnus if I ever saw one, who goes into a technical schtik that would give Thomas Alva Edison the bends. It all adds up to "close enough for a jury, Kelly." Twelve just and prudents saying yea.

At this point I can visualize the scene back at the club, because it's midnight and Kelly the Klutz is still missing. My public is waiting. Or not waiting. Some clown from the William Morris Agency will be getting into the deal and some jerk from the Catskills will be getting a clean shot at the Big Time. That's a lie, though; it isn't big time. At Vegas I play the Lounge, never the big room. I do medium time, never the Johnny Carson route.

So I'm feeling very sorry for myself, and I can see the Feds know it and they're all up for the Hawaiian number. My mind is like a slot machine with these guys dropping true coin into my head and my eyes coming up cherries. I'm scared, like on a downer scared. I find myself thinking dumb things like the Supreme Court abolishing the death penalty. (Personally, up till now, I believed in the death penalty.) Unlike W. C. Fields's epitaph, I would rather be in Philadelphia.

Bango. Start idea time. Socrates Kelly is on the think. So these heavy lines from my Mr. FBI and Company are getting to me. Get up, Kelly! Get in there like John Garfield, né Jake Garfinkle. Go for the throat. Body and soul, Chick.

Maybe the gut-pull I feel right now isn't the fact that Fordham and my FBI guy are pressing me like a White Tower special. Maybe I know I can't laugh my way out of it all. Lordie, Miz Scarlett, I have

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laughed my way out of things. Two marriages, a bad screen test, a bomb album, 1042 night-club dates, broads with teased hair, teasing. I wish I had a friend. Someone I could rely on to be indignant that Chick Kelly was in the bag for a kidnaping rap. So these guys have a mound of evidence that would pale the Alps. Then I get this idea. Maybe I'm a Patsy. Patsy Kelly. Irene. W. C. Fields. Holy Jehoshaphat. Bango.

So I tell them that is a fine presentation, Messrs. FBI, but it won't wash. Let me hear the track on the kidnaper's phone call. This is one thing I can do. Listen. I've got an ear, man. Some people have eyes, some people have feel, I have an ear. Name me one other guy who can do Claude Rains like me outside of Larry Storch. Lay anyone else that does a Shirley Temple and gets that glottis bit right. Let me hear the track on the phone call, I say, and Mr. FBI says okay.

Man, you got a bad ear is what I tell him after I listen to the "Tommy is foin, m'dear, just be pre. . .p. . .a. . .red to pay. . .one hundred thousand dollaaars to see the little chap again."

Boy, that was the worst imitation of me I've ever heard. The pauses were wrong, and the elongated "a" was a mess. It was lesson time, and I was teacher. So I tell these dudes all about mimicry. How a professional looks for speech eccentricities which you build an impersonation on. A smart poodle could do a Bette Davis, because her speech is unique. But nonprofessionals don't do Bette Davis, they do a professional doing Bette Davis.

It's like the kid's game where you whisper something in someone's ear, and they whisper the phrase into another kid's ear, and so on, until they go through ten kids, and at the end, the phrase is all mangled. What this cat on the phone is doing is not a W. C. Fields, but me doing a W. C. Fields. He's not that bad, but he's not me. Also, I have a clincher for the grad from Fordham.

"If you want your guy, he's in Bridgeport," I tell him. My FBI guy looks sick. Fordham looks like I just pronounced God dead.

"Bridgeport, Connecticut?" says my guy, "Come off it, Kelly. How could you know that?"

So I explain the whole bit about how the pronunciation of the vowel "a" starts in the Naugatuck Valley and proceeds to get broader as you wend way to Boston, where it's a mile wide, and then up into Maine and into the Maritime Prov-

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inces, where "boat" becomes a two-syllable word. Professor Kelly is giving a lesson in phonetics, and you'd better be prepared for the quiz.

Then I lay the whole bomb rack on them. I tell them the call was made from a phone booth somewhere in the vicinity of the Fairfield Avenue Bridge in Bridgeport, Connecticut. I got the whole thing trapped because I've played Bridgeport. I've listened to Bridgeport. It's got a sound of its own, especially when you're down by the Housatonic River. I used to do a Sid Caesar-type bit about the bridge going up and down. It's a fluttering labial. I got an ear, pal. That was the Fairfield Avenue Bridge intonation in the background.

Okay, I spent five days in a cell, but the publicity was worth it. Hell, I've got a talk thing lined up with Carson, and my FBI guy is lending me the voiceprints. I can also do twenty minutes of W. C. Fields. Now that's gold, man. Nuggets. I even got a phone call from Edith about the alimony jazz.

But a couple of things bother me.

One is that the Franklin kid was dead when they found the farmhouse in Southport, because I was wrong about the Fairfield Avenue Bridge, but at least I was right about the general area and I gave them somewhere to look and ask questions.

Also, I learn that Tony Algonzo, Tommy the Lemon's brother, is putting out a contract. What the hey, babe, keep laughing. It's all you've got, Kelly.

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a NEW Rand story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

In this new adventure—the 26th—of Rand, head of the Department of Concealed Communications, the Double-C man again combines deciphering and detection, and he's an expert in both pursuits . . . Is Rand vaguely thinking of retirement? We hope not! His cases are too interesting. Join Rand now as he investigates a gambling club and a zoo, on the trail of gunrunning and murder . . .

THE SPY AND THE INTERCEPTED LETTERS

by EDWARD D. HOCH

The tall black man passed through the wide double doors of the Carnaby Club and paused to check his coat. In the pocket there was still an admission ticket to the London zoo and a miniature map of the city's Underground system. When he spoke to the girl in the checkroom, his voice was pleasant and carefully accented—the voice of someone who had learned his English in the colonies. He took the numbered slip the girl gave him and went down the carpeted steps to the club proper.

After watching the action at the roulette wheel for some minutes he bought a quantity of chips and began betting on the black. He played for nearly half an hour, losing most of his chips, then moved away from the table. He asked to see the owner of the club, but was told he was unavailable. Finally the black man pocketed his remaining chips and went up the steps to the checkroom for his coat.

"Have a lucky evening, sir?" the checkroom girl asked.

He grinned slightly. "Not too good, but I will be back." He gave her a one-pound tip.

"Oh, thank you, sir!"

"My pleasure." He was still smiling as he went out the door

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into the damp London night.

Halfway down the next block, at a point where the shadow of an ancient tree fell across the sidewalk, a second figure joined the black man. There was a brief silent scuffle, then the sudden plunging of a knife.

The black man fell to the ground, rolling half into the gutter before he lay still. The second figure, a man in a short jacket, waited just an instant to be certain his job was done, then moved back into the shadows and disappeared.

Inspector Stephens of Scotland Yard glowered across the desk at Jeffery Rand. "What's your interest in this affair, Rand? The last time you involved yourself in one of my cases—that Bermuda Cipher affair—we had a bloody bad time of it."

"I trust this won't be a repeat performance," Rand said. "I simply want some information about Shack Milby, the black man who was knifed to death last night."

"What sort of information?"

"Was it a mugging—a robbery?"

"His wallet wasn't touched, nor were some casino chips from the Carnaby Club. Whatever the motive, it wasn't robbery. Here are the contents of his pockets—nothing unusual. Of course we are looking into some sort of racial angle, but I doubt if that's the answer. He was a foreigner, wasn't he?"

Rand nodded. "A deputy minister in the new African nation of Nowanda. He arrived in London three days ago, apparently on official business."

"And that's what involves you? More work for the Department of Concealed Communications?"

"In a sense," Rand answered vaguely. "What can you tell me about Milby's whereabouts before he was murdered?"

"Well, there were those chips from the Carnaby Club, and at least one witness—the gambling columnist, Tony Pools—remembers seeing him there, at the roulette table. The casino is only a block down the street from where Milby was killed. The checkroom girl remembers him, too. The Carnaby Club does not attract that many black patrons."

"You think his killing was the result of winning at the gaming tables?"

The Inspector shook his head. "I told you it wasn't a robbery. And Pools tells me that Milby seemed to be losing more than he was winning. At one point he even asked to see the owner."

"That would be Eric Proc-

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tor. We have rumors linking him with illegal traffic in guns to various revolutionary groups around the world. You may remember last year when someone supplied the IRA with Russian rockets. We think that was Proctor."

"So Proctor is your interest in the killing?"

"Partly," Rand admitted. "That, and something else." He got to his feet. "My thanks for your assistance, Inspector. I think I'll visit the Carnaby Club."

He left Inspector Stephens' office at New Scotland Yard and drove across London to the Carnaby Club. It was one of the city's newer gambling establishments, located on a quiet street just off Grosvenor Square. Now, just before noon on a Thursday morning, the place was quiet except for the hum of an electric floor polisher.

"Is Mr. Proctor around?" Rand asked the man operating the machine.

The man motioned toward the inner office and Rand followed a short hallway to a room where a fat gray-haired man was busy on the telephone. When he noticed Rand in the doorway he cut the conversation short and hung up. "Well, it's Rand, isn't it? Come to try your luck?"

"You might say that. I'm working on the Milby case."

"Milby? The rape murder in Kensington Gardens?"

"No, the stabbing last night in the next block. I understand he left here shortly before he was killed."

The fat man shifted in his chair. "What is it, Rand?" he asked with a trace of a smile. "Is the spy business so bad they've demoted you to muggings?"

Rand had known Proctor for several years, mainly as a dealer in the twilight areas of the law. He'd been arrested a number of times, but never convicted or even brought to trial. They were hardly friends, but Rand held a grudging respect for the man's native cunning. "I think you know why I'm here, Proctor."

"Hardly."

"Then suppose I spell it out. Shack Milby was a deputy minister of Nowanda, a newly independent African nation. We have reason to believe he was in London to purchase arms for his country, but not through regular channels. You wouldn't be doing a bit of illegal gunrunning on the side now, would you, Proctor?"

The fat man studied Rand for a moment before replying. "Do you have any proof that I am?"

"You were arrested last year

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for selling rockets to the IRA for use in Northern Ireland."

"I was held for questioning," Proctor corrected him. "And then released when there was insufficient evidence for an arrest."

"And now you're supplying guns to Nowanda?"

"Certainly not!"

"Shack Milby lost some money at your gaming tables, and he obviously intended to come back for more play, since he kept some chips. He also asked to see you. I believe the lost money could have been part payment for the contraband weapons he wanted you to supply."

Proctor snorted at the suggestion. "Your trouble, Rand, is that you imagine everyone wearing a cloak and carrying a dagger."

"The person who stabbed Milby was carrying one," Rand said. "There's no denying that." He turned and left the office.

It had been a strange affair from the beginning. The first message had been intercepted by another government department and forwarded to Double-C for deciphering. Armed with a court order, they'd been able to intercept and copy a number of subsequent messages, all mailed to Proctor and signed by Shack Milby in Nowanda. The case was being handled by one of Rand's assistants, young Parkinson, who, with the help of postal authorities, had come up with one lead—a girl named Coral Wing.

Coral worked at the London zoo and apparently received Milby's letters and passed them on to Proctor. The suspicion was that the letters were in preparation for Milby's trip from Nowanda to London, during which the business would be transacted. But with the messages themselves Double-C hit a blank wall even after Rand was brought in. The cipher could not be cracked. And now Milby had come, spent two days in London, and been murdered.

Parkinson was waiting for Rand back at the office. "Have you had any luck with Scotland Yard, sir?"

"Nothing, except that Milby lost money at the Carnaby Club's gaming tables a short time before he died."

"You think he was buying guns from Proctor?"

Rand shrugged. "Proctor denies it, and I can't prove it. In any event, if that were the case why should Proctor have him killed?"

"I don't know, sir."

"How are we coming with the messages?"

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Parkinson shrugged. "Not good. Want to take a look?"

Rand followed him down the hall to the windowless decoding room that was the heart of Concealed Communications. Five men were at work here, with computers and blackboards, puzzling over the eleven messages that were tacked in position on the cork-lined walls.

"Anything new?" Rand asked the nearest man, a boyish mathematician named Edwards.

"Not a thing, sir. We're still stumped by those twelve letters. The eleven messages contain a total of 2340 separate characters, arranged in standard groups of five. But those 2340 characters consist of only twelve letters of the alphabet—A, E, H, I, K, L, M, N, O, P, U, W. It's inconceivable that messages this long could be written with so few letters. We've tried making combinations of letters stand for single letters, as in a Vigenere cipher, but there are still too few letters."

Parkinson moved to Rand's side. "Naturally we've thought of code lists, with two-letter combinations standing for specific words or phrases, but again there's the same problem."

Rand's eyes ran over the list of letters, as it had every day for a week. "Not even a T, our second most frequently used letter."

"Or an S or R or D—all of which are fairly common. I'd venture a guess that it's not a transpositon cipher. It would be impossible to write eleven lengthy messages using only those letters, whatever their order."

"So it's a substitution cipher of some sort."

"And that's what we've been working on all week, sir. But we haven't cracked it yet."

Rand sighed. "Keep at it. These things have a way of breaking when we least expect it."

Back in his cluttered office overlooking the Thames, Rand busied himself with the mail. There was a report of a new cipher being used by the Russians—probably computer-made—and a letter from someone at Scotland Yard informing them of a simple book-code in use among teenage narcotics addicts in London. The book they were using was the Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

Lastly there was a clipping from Hastings, carefully cut from that morning's London *Times*, which quoted Moscow sources to the effect that Rand's archrival Taz had retired to a farm in the Russian countryside. "The cold war is really over," Rand told young Parkinson. "Taz has retired."

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"Really?"

"Maybe I should retire with him. Maybe there's no need for us any more, Parkinson."

"But you're too young to retire, sir! You're only in your mid-forties!"

"I could always get a job in the foreign office."

"Would you be happy there?"

Rand thought about it. "No. But one of the troubles in our modern world is that too many of the war-makers are unwilling to step down. The generals and the admirals go on, and as long as they do, there will be wars and rumors of wars."

"You're an idealist, sir," Parkinson said. "There'll always be work for us."

"I'm afraid you're right," Rand said. "But at least the Russians are peaceful. Old Taz—we had some memorable duels!"

Rand turned to stare out the window, seeing again the events of his memory. After a moment Parkinson cleared his throat and asked, "What will you do about the Milby matter, sir?"

"Do? Why, I think I'll go to the zoo, Parkinson."

It had been a damp, rainy November so typical of London's autumn. But this day the sun had broken through, bringing a festive air to the zoo in Regent's Park. Strolling among groups of school children with their balloons and candy, Rand could almost feel young again. He paused beside a workman cleaning out the tiger cage and asked the way to the acquisitions office.

"That would be over near the east tunnel, just beyond the central mammal house."

Rand followed directions to the zoo office, where he found Coral Wing inspecting photographs of penguins. She was a dark-haired girl in her late twenties, with long legs and high cheekbones. She smiled when Rand introduced himself, and he detected a trace of Oriental parentage about her eyes.

"Forgive this mess," she said. "We're acquiring some new birds for our penguin pool, and I'm trying to decide if these are suitable."

"They look fine to me," Rand said, inspecting the photos.

"Now what can I do for the British government?" She was coolly self-assured as she spoke, and he wondered if it reflected experience with governments or merely with men.

"I'm investigating the murder of Shack Milby. You may have read about it in the morning papers."

Her eyes widened, showing the first signs of real emotion.

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"I corresponded with Mr. Milby about some animals. I work with the zoological society here in the acquisition of new animals. Mainly it involves correspondence with governments and zoos and animal dealers throughout the world."

"And Milby replied to your letters in code?"

She threw back her head and laughed—a delicate, birdlike sound that matched her Oriental features. "With some of his letters he enclosed sealed envelopes and asked me to mail them to a friend in London. He said they were chess moves for a match they were playing by mail."

"Didn't it seem odd that he sent them through you? And in code?"

"I never opened the letters, so I had no way of knowing they were in code. And he sent them through me because his friend had been in trouble with the law and was afraid the police might intercept letters with a foreign postmark. It seemed a simple request—to mail a few letters—and I honored it. I was anxious to stay on good terms with the Nowandan government until our animal deal was completed."

"You honestly believed they were simply chess moves?"

She looked away. "Whatever I believed, I didn't feel I was doing anything wrong."

"Who was the man you sent the messages to?" Rand asked.

"He's the owner of a gambling club near here. His name is Proctor."

"Milby was killed leaving Proctor's club."

"I'm sorry. I know nothing about it."

Rand had been trying to place her accent. Now he asked, "Are you American?"

"Yes. Hawaiian, actually. My mother was part Chinese. I worked at the zoo in Honolulu for five years before coming to London."

"I suppose zoos are much the same around the world."

She held up a photograph of a coiled cobra. "This is different. Snakes weren't allowed in the islands, and we had none at the zoo."

"Too bad, I suppose, if you're a snake lover."

She seemed glad to be off the subject of the messages. "Would you like me to show you around the place?"

"Another time, perhaps. I should be getting back."

She walked him to the door and they parted on friendly terms. He'd have been ready to believe her about the chess moves except for one thing. Shack Milby was dead, and he hadn't been murdered over a chess game . . .

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Tony Pools was a slender young man who'd become a familiar figure at the gambling clubs around London. He made his living through gambling, and through a tabloid newspaper column that combined gaming tips with views of scandalous London nightlife. Rand knew him slightly, and he knew that Pools was the best witness they had to Shack Milby's last moments of life.

"Sure," he told Rand, lounging at a Mayfair bar in the early afternoon. "I already told Inspector Stephens I saw him there."

"Were you gambling at the Carnaby Club?"

Tony Pools nodded, brushing a cigarette ash from his sleeve. "At the roulette table. I noticed Milby right off, because they don't get many black patrons. He was playing the black, and he lost more than he won."

"What did he do then?"

"I heard him ask for the owner, Proctor. Then he got his coat and left."

"What about Proctor? You get around this city. What do you hear?"

The slim young man shrugged. "He's been in trouble with the law on occasion, but he manages to get off."

"I'm especially interested in his gunrunning activities."

"They say he's one of the major brokers in the illegal armaments business. He's even been known to recruit small armies of mercenaries, equip them with Russian or American weapons, and send them off to one of the emerging African nations."

"If he was supplying guns to Nowanda, why would he kill Shack Milby?"

"No idea that he did, chum. Milby might have been killed by rival political forces from back home. Or simply by a street mugger who got scared off before he could steal anything. Those things happen all the time." Tony Pools drained his glass and stood up. "You'll excuse me? Got to be going now."

Rand sat alone at the table for a few moments before he too departed.

"Still nothing," Parkinson reported back at the Double-C offices. "We've tried everything."

"What about the Nowandan language?" Rand suggested, slipping off his coat.

"Another dead end. The name of the country has a D in it, which is missing in our twelve letters. No, it gets back to a substitution cipher every time, but we can't crack it."

Rand looked at the list of letters again: A, E, H, I, K, L,

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M, N, O, P, U, W. "All the vowels are there. You could make a good many words with those twelve letters."

"But without R, S, T, and B what do you use to spell *rifles*, *tanks*, *bombs*? Proctor was receiving these messages, and they weren't orders for *lime* or *wine*."

Rand leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. "Suppose you run over it again from the beginning, Parkinson. How did we intercept the messages in the first place, and how did we link them with Proctor and Milby and that girl at the zoo?"

"Well, sir, the messages are in five-letter cipher groups, averaging about twenty groups per message. As you know, there are 2340 characters in all, consisting of only twelve letters of the alphabet. The messages are typed on letterheads of the Nowandan government, and signed by Shack Milby, deputy minister of internal affairs. The first one came to our attention when it was discovered with Proctor's mail some two months ago. There may have been previous messages we missed."

"Who discovered it?"

"The Inland Revenue has been investigating him for some time for possible tax evasion. You see, he's never reported any of his income from the armaments business. One of their people found the first message. The procedure was not quite legal, but it certainly put us onto something interesting. Once we had the first message, it was easy to intercept and copy the others. They were all mailed in the same plain white envelopes, without return address."

"How'd you get onto the girl at the zoo?"

"We traced the letters back to the post office that received them and put a man on it, watching for the next one. It was deposited along with the usual daily mail from the zoological society office. We checked their incoming mail and discovered that Miss Coral Wing was receiving regular letters from Shack Milby in Nowanda."

Rand nodded. "Letters about the animals. And his messages to Proctor were enclosed, in sealed envelopes. He told the girl they were chess moves and asked her to mail them to Proctor. Why would he do that rather than mail the letters direct?"

"Proctor's connection with gunrunning is well known, sir. A letter, or series of letters, to him from a country like Nowanda would immediately be suspect. This way, with a London postmark and a plain envelope, he hoped the letters would get

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through to Proctor unnoticed."

"Then, after eleven or more messages, Milby himself arrived."

"Three days ago, sir. He did a bit of sightseeing, and he went to the Carnaby Club. And then he was murdered."

"Why?" Rand asked, but the question was directed more at himself than at Parkinson. "Why kill Milby—unless someone was afraid he'd lead the way to Proctor."

"He'd already done that, sir."

"But they didn't know it, did they? They didn't even know we'd intercepted the messages. The originals have been delivered to Proctor in his mail, haven't they?"

"Oh, yes." But Parkinson hesitated.

"What is it?" Rand asked.

"It's just the Inland Revenue, sir. I don't know what questions they might have been asking."

"Who's the agent on the case?"

"Fellow named Poacher Morgan. He's a demon."

"I'll see him," Rand decided.

On the way out of the office he encountered Hastings, his immediate superior in the complex structure of British Intelligence. "Rand! I tried to phone you! I trust you've seen the clipping about Taz's retirement. What do you make of it?"

Rand shrugged. "He was getting old."

"Perhaps the cold war—or the code war—is really over. If they decide to shut down Double-C, I can always find a place for you upstairs."

"Upstairs?"

"The Foreign Office."

"Yes," Rand said. "I'd considered that."

"Think about it. There are worse things."

Rand nodded and kept on walking.

A half hour later he found Poacher Morgan in his office at the Inland Revenue. Morgan was a red-haired man with a ruddy complexion and a firm handshake. Rand guessed his age at near 50, though he could well have been younger.

"Yes, certainly! The Proctor affair. Well, now, you know how those things are. The bloke's into everything—gambling clubs, armaments, gunrunning. Sure as hell he's knocking off something on his income tax. I've made him my personal target."

"Why?" Rand asked.

"Why? Like the mountain—because he's there, damn it!" Morgan leaned back in his chair. "You work for the government. You know how it is. We have to keep busy or they decide to cut

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the budget. Proctor is a good way for me to keep busy. Some of his affairs are tangled and illegal. And if I uncover something big, the press will be on him in a minute. You must do the same thing in your department, don't you? Isn't there some big fat target that you always mention at budget time?"

Rand thought of Taz. "No," he answered. No, it had never been like that with Taz.

"Well, you'd better find yourself one, or come next year's budget someone might decide they don't need Concealed Communications any more. The world's at peace now, or hadn't you heard?"

"But about Proctor?" Rand asked, steering the conversation back to the original topic. "Did he know you were intercepting his mail?"

"No, no. The first time I did it the thing was a bit illegal, you know. I could have gotten into trouble. But then after we found that coded message your boys got a court order for the rest of it."

"Did you ever speak to Coral Wing, the young woman who mailed the messages to Proctor?"

"No, certainly not. I've spoken to none of the principals directly." He hesitated. "Except for Milby, of course."

Rand sat up straight. "You questioned Shack Milby before he was murdered?"

"Briefly, yes. Of course he denied all knowledge of the coded messages addressed to Proctor."

"Of course."

"Said he didn't even know the man."

"When was this?"

"The morning of the day he died—just yesterday, it was."

"I see," Rand said. "Thank you for the help."

He left Morgan at his desk and went downstairs to the street. First he found a public phone and called Inspector Stephens at Scotland Yard. Then he got in his car and drove to the zoo in Regent's Park.

It was almost dusk by the time he'd parked his car and hurried through the zoo's main gate. "Almost closing time," the guard warned.

Rand glanced at his watch. "It's only four o'clock."

"We close at sunset, sir. That's early, this time of year."

"I won't be long."

He found Coral Wing still in her office, finishing up some correspondence. "I didn't know if you'd be here this late," he said.

"I work the same hours, year around. It's only the zoo gates that are affected by the sun.

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But it's good to see you again. Have you come back for your tour?"

"I think so, yes."

"Very good. Let me just finish up here." She stuffed a few envelopes and put them in the mail sack. Then she smiled brightly and said, "Come on. There's lots to see."

They headed down the path along Regent's Canal, where there were boats in summer. It was almost dark now and the zoo was growing empty of visitors. Soon they would be alone with the growls and cries of the animals. "It's a big place," he commented. "I haven't been here in years."

"I'm here every day and it's still a big place. That's the Snowdon Aviary across the canal. If there was more light we could walk through it."

As they came to the bridge across the canal, a man in a short jacket suddenly appeared and started toward them in the dusk. He held out his right hand, and for an instant Rand thought he was meant to shake it. Then, at the last second, he caught the dull gleam of the knife blade.

"Look out!" he yelled, and pushed Coral to one side. Then the man was on him, breathing hard, and Rand was fighting for his life.

He felt the blade tear at his coat, and then he landed a lucky blow and was free. His assailant toppled backward into a hedge. "My God!" Coral gasped. "Who is it?"

"The man who killed Shack Milby, I imagine," Rand said, catching his breath.

"There's another!" she cried out, pointing at the ridge. A second man had appeared, and even in the dimness Rand could see the pistol in his hand.

"Come on!" He grabbed Coral's hand and pulled her in the opposite direction, toward the west tunnel that led to the main zoo area. He silently cursed his bad luck at coming unarmed, but he hadn't expected anything quite so dangerous.

"They're following!" she told him as they ran. "The one you hit is on his feet, too."

Their running feet echoed through the tunnel. "There must be someone over here who can help us," Rand gasped.

"No," she answered, panting for breath. "The zoo is closed."

They were into the open again, running down the Broad Walk past the reptiliary and the aquarium, hearing in their ears the pounding footsteps behind them and the low growls of animals ahead.

"You know this place. Where can we hide?"

"This is the elephant

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pavilion—no, keep going, the lion house is next. We can lose them there."

They reached the door of the lion house, but it was already locked. Rand turned and saw their pursuers not 30 feet away. "Now where?"

"Come on. This way." She was in the lead now, guiding him through the unfamiliar darkness that was as strange as the wilds of Africa. They ran behind the lion house, past the raccoons and seals, till they reached the wire enclosure of the penguin pool.

Only then did Rand realize they were trapped. The man with the gun had got around in front of them, and now he blocked their path. Behind them, the one with the knife was closing fast.

From somewhere near, a lion roared in the darkness. Rand felt the wire fence of the penguin pool at his back, saw the gunman raising his pistol as if in slow motion. Then the man spoke. "Get away from him, Coral," he said.

She had moved away from Rand's side. "I'm clear," she said distinctly. "Go ahead and shoot him."

"So you're in with them," Rand said.

"What does it matter now? Kill him, Carl."

Rand thought of Taz, living out his life in the peaceful solitude of the Moscow countryside. Then he went backward over the fence just as the gun fired.

As he hit the water of the penguin pool, the echo of the shot still in his ears, he heard the shrill screeching of police whistles. Inspector Stephens had come at last.

"A little nick in the shoulder," Stephens said later, when they'd pulled him from the pool and patched him up. Hastings was there, too, and Parkinson from his office. "But you took a big chance."

"I had to let him shoot at me," Rand said, trying to sit up. "I figured you'd had time to get there with your men, but you couldn't find us in the darkness. The sound of a shot was the only signal I could think of at the moment."

"Stephens and his men got them all," Hastings said. "Both men and the girl. But suppose you explain it to us. How did you know she was the brains of this thing?"

"It was the cipher, of course," Rand said. "Double-C had worked on it for weeks, getting nowhere. Parkinson here thought it was a substitution cipher, but it wasn't. It was the simplest sort of transposition—with one important difference.

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The message was written in a foreign language."

"Yes," Parkinson agreed, "but what language has only twelve letters in its alphabet?"

"Hawaiian," Rand answered.

"Hawaiian?"

He nodded. "The messages could only have been written in Hawaiian, and unless you're willing to believe that Milby somehow knew the language—which is most doubtful—that means he didn't write them. Coral Wing did. Her parents were Hawaiian, and she came here from the islands. She had some fake Nowandan letterheads printed up and used them for her messages to Proctor. It was a safety factor in the event Proctor was ever arrested and the messages were discovered. Milby corresponded with her regularly about the animals, and she decided his was a safe name to use as a cover."

"But then he came to London."

"Yes," Rand sighed. "Not only did he come, but Poacher Morgan from the Inland Revenue questioned him about the messages. This roused Milby's curiosity, so he went to see Coral—there was a zoo ticket in his pocket, remember. Then he went to the Carnaby Club and tried to see Proctor. That's when Coral decided she had to have him killed before he discovered too much. You see, the mistake we made was in thinking Milby was a spy. He was just an innocent deputy minister, on a trip to London."

"And Coral Wing?"

"She's been using her post with the zoological society to funnel orders for illegal arms to Proctor. There was nothing strange about her corresponding regularly with small Asian and African nations, or even with private individuals in those nations. It was a perfect cover. The requests for arms were translated by her into Hawaiian, enciphered by simple transposition, and mailed to Proctor in plain envelopes on Nowandan letterheads. The scheme might have gone on for years, except that Poacher Morgan of the Inland Revenue opened one of the envelopes, and Shack Milby decided to visit London."

"And her two hired killers?"

"That's what they were—hired killers. She had them get rid of Milby, and then she had them tailing me. When I phoned you, Inspector, and said I expected trouble at the zoo, I was only thinking of the girl. I didn't realize it would be quite such a messy thing."

"You'll be healed in no time," Hastings said. "And back on the job at Double-C. We're not quite ready to retire you."

Rand smiled. "I hope not."

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a *NEW* crime story by

ANTHONY GILBERT

Once again we marvel at Anthony Gilbert's grasp of and affinity for a certain type of character. She knows it so well . . . The world is full of "invisible witnesses"—but "if you're shut off from the world, the world is equally shut off from you" . . .

THE INVISIBLE WITNESS

by ANTHONY GILBERT

I suppose I originally noticed the old woman because she always occupied the same seat in the park. It had a copper plate on the back which read:

In Memory of
Mrs. CHARLOTTE RACE
Who loved this place

A good many of the benches in Phillimore Park have similar inscriptions to commemorate the army of old people who came here for a few hours in the sun during their declining years. The seats were full of them—the old people, I mean. This one looked much like the rest; she wore a black and white tweed coat and a felt basin of a hat over her white hair and a long dark red scarf—the scarf the gift of a dead-and-gone nephew, she told me.

She carried a solid black leather bag that probably contained most of her worldly treasures, and she differed from the rest in that she never had a newspaper or a bit of knitting to occupy her time. She sat with her hands in her lap; nothing moved but her eyes.

One afternoon when she was the sole occupant of the bench I took a place at the farther end, shaking out my morning paper. On fine days I often walked through the park to my subway station; being a free-lance journalist I could choose my own hours. That afternoon, I remember, a wave of pigeons had settled on the asphalt, strutting, and preening their shining breasts. One of them, even plumper than the rest,

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reminded me of my Aunt Selina who used to attend church in a purple marabout and shawl. The Old Indestructible, they called her.

I hadn't been seated more than a minute or two when the old woman leaned toward me.

"Can you tell me the time, sir?"

I told her it was 3:30.

She leaned back, smiling. "Then I can stay a little longer," she said.

I supposed her appointment, whatever it might be, was for four o'clock. I wondered whom she was expecting to meet, other than, of course, Death in due course.

After a moment she spoke again. "They're such greedy birds, aren't they?" and she pointed to the pigeons. "Bring a little bit of bread for the sparrows or the ducks and it's always the pigeons that get it."

"Not the gulls?" I murmured. I don't know why I let myself be drawn into a conversation. But it was a pleasant afternoon and I had a few minutes to spare. I liked to watch the gulls flying—like a ballet they were, swooping, diving, soaring again with their prey.

"Only if you throw it up into the air," said the old woman seriously. "And I never do that. Mind you," she added, "it's not much I bring. I'm against wasting food, but a bit of crust sometimes—it doesn't run to more than that when you're living on a small pension."

"I don't know how anyone does. Unless they have friends or something." I meant children; she had a wedding ring worn deep into her finger. It didn't occur to me she might be going to beg. She didn't look the type.

"The Old Age Pension helps," she told me. "Of course, I never taste meat. It's out of the question, the price the way it is. If only people would take a stand and refuse to buy, prices would come down."

I suppose she thought I looked restive, for she rapidly changed the subject, saying how fortunate Londoners were to have these lovely parks.

"I go up to the pond sometimes," she said. "Last year's cygnets are as big as their parents now, such beautiful birds. And did you know the Chinese geese had a family last year? If it wasn't for the parks we should have to go to China to see a thing like that."

A few minutes later she said she must be getting home. "I make myself a cup of tea at four o'clock," she confided. "I find if you don't keep regular hours, that's when you start

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going downhill. When you've only yourself to keep house for, you get all hugger-mugger if you're not careful."

As she picked up her gloves I saw that her fingernails were beautifully tended and painted a deep coral pink, and her hair under her indifferent hat was carefully arranged.

You'll never let yourself go to pieces, I thought. And then I put her out of my mind. She was just one of a host of elderly women sitting in the sun in the evening of her days. I didn't even know her name.

I saw her again a few days later, still alone on her bench. She smiled and said she'd been watching a baby poodle trying to play with a swan.

"It didn't understand," she said. "Well, they don't at that age. A swan could drown a little dog like that. And the owner was not even noticing. I screamed and the swan went away and then the man came up. I think he thought I was mad, I think they all did."

I murmured something about it being the breeding season, so you had to be careful.

"It's cruel how they have to learn, isn't it?" she agreed. "It just wanted to play." A man went past and she chuckled slyly.

"See that one?" she said. "I call him Mr. Drake. The way he puts his feet down—see?"

I wouldn't have noticed it myself, but she was quite right. He walked exactly in a duck's splay-footed fashion.

"You're very noticing," I congratulated her.

"You might say it's my hobby. He comes here three or four times a week. It's their little habits that turn people into individuals, you see. Some of them would be surprised to realize how much I know about them."

I saw her quite often after that. Sometimes she shared the seat with some other old biddy and then she'd just glance up and smile. At other times she was alone, but she never gave the impression of being solitary. She felt herself part of the pattern, I suppose. I wondered what stories she made up about the other passers-by.

I got into the habit of stopping for a few minutes if she was alone, though I didn't learn much more about her—just that she had a single room in a big apartment house near the park, had her own gas-ring but shared domestic facilities. It was the history of hundreds of thousands of elderly folk with no home ties. She never complained. Once she said it would be nice to have a meal

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out now and again, but of course the small pension would never permit that.

As I got to know her better a few more facts emerged. She was a widow, had married a man who had a little neighborhood store business, but he'd gone bankrupt and died soon after. She'd gone back to work in a shop, selling behind a counter. She'd enjoyed that—all the different people, see? Now at 70 she enjoyed her leisure, and there was always someone nice to talk to. She never spoke of a child; usually if there have been any, some whisper creeps in.

Once I offered her a newspaper but though she took it, she laid it on the seat. The passers-by were her newspaper—"and then I have my little radio. That keeps me in touch." Now and again she went to the public library, but it was a bit of a walk—"and anyway," she added, "it's people I mind about. I mean, there's nothing you can do about strikes and rising prices, but people are always real. You get to recognize them after a time, though my sight's not quite what it was. But I've good hearing still. Some of the bits of conversation you pick up—it makes you wonder. And some of them have a child or a dog. There's one woman limps on a big stick with a dog's head for the handle. I think to myself sometimes, you've probably never noticed me, but say you were in trouble with the police—couldn't show where you were at such and such a time—out walking you might say, on your own; well, I might be able to give you an alibi. But no one would think of asking me—the invisible witness."

She laughed. She had a pretty tinkling laugh.

Another visitor and one frequently occupying a seat near my old girl was an old tramp in a tattered black coat and a black hat that no self-respecting bird would have accepted for a nest. He was always laden with a huge haversack packed with parcels, food, debris—that he'd unpack and lay out along the seat—presumably to prevent anyone else from sharing it. My old friend spoke of him once.

"I don't want you to think I'm a vain old woman," she said, "but I'm sometimes terrified he'll come and settle along of me. He gives me such funny looks—it wouldn't do, no, it wouldn't do at all."

"He wouldn't do you any harm," I assured her. "There are people all about."

"If he was to ask me for money, what could I say? I don't have any, and that's the

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truth, but if you keep yourself looking respectable no one believes you. And you do read such awful things. There was that old woman not so far from Harrods, attacked in broad daylight just for the few pounds in her purse. She'd come up to buy blankets, been saving months. And they never got the man who did it."

I insisted she was working herself up over nothing, though I didn't much care for the look of the old tramp myself.

"If you're really nervous you could sit on a seat that was already occupied," I suggested. But she looked startled.

"Oh, I couldn't do that. I like to think of this as my place. Sometimes I wonder if I ever saw her—Charlotte Race, I mean. I could even have spoken to her. There wouldn't have been a plaque on the seat in those days, of course. And you never exchange names. Well, you like to keep yourself to yourself, you know. But I think she'd be a widow like me—a married woman wouldn't have the time to sit around. I daresay she liked the trees and the birds, the same as I do, and a bit of company. I can almost feel her here sometimes. It gives you a sense of belonging."

If her seat was occupied I might find her up by the pond, where the children sailed their boats and the elderly gentlemen flew their kites. That made her laugh.

"So serious," she said. "You'd think it was the Grand Prix. There's one has a kite shaped like a falcon, ever so realistic. I like to watch out for that. Might have been a gamekeeper's, I think."

The days I didn't go to the park I didn't think about her at all; that was where she belonged and, so far as I was concerned, outside the park she had no existence. I liked her courage, and sometimes wished I could help her; but I had my own troubles—as haven't we all—and they took up a lot of my time.

It was a blustery summer; she still wore the black and white tweed coat and tied the red scarf round her throat.

"Odd," she said, "to think that Humphrey who gave me this has been gone these many years, and I linger on."

It was during that wet July it happened, an event that set the whole neighborhood ablaze, though it didn't rate much above a paragraph in the national press. After all, the news was full of wars and rumors of wars, strikes and violence everywhere, death falling out of the skies—so the death of one little trollop was pretty small beer. Only not in

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the place where it happened. As my old lady said, there's always the personal element. It might have been me, she said, and that was the general feeling.

The young woman's body was found in a little private garden designed a century earlier for a royal princess, within the precincts of the park. In spring and summer, when the weather was fine, this was a favorite spot, especially for visitors, from both home and overseas. There was a stretch of water, covered with rose-colored lilies whose like I have seen nowhere else, and each season a white duck brought forth her brood and exercised them among the lilies' broad umbrella leaves.

The whole garden was roofed by thick vinery and surrounded by a paved walk within a box hedge; and there were seats at intervals round three sides of the garden. It was on one of the seats, the farthest one from the entrance, that the body was found. The previous afternoon had been cloudy with storm, breaking into thundery rain, and at such times there was something sinister about the little garden—it became a place of shadows and pattering raindrops.

One such afternoon I had dived into the shelter of the vinery during a sudden storm and found my old friend on one of the seats there. She was wrapped in a huge gray raincoat with sleeves like the flukes of a whale.

"You're very brave to be out in such weather," I told her. "Brave and rash."

"It was better when I started out," she said. "I haven't seen you this last day or so."

"I'm not the regular you are," I reminded her. "I go by bus or subway if the weather's unpromising."

"You get tired of your own company," she explained. "And, of course, you can't have even a bird where I live. I like to think Charlotte Race wouldn't let a little bit of bad weather defeat her."

That had been one week ago. And now, not a hundred yards from where we'd been sitting, a woman had been murdered, strangled by her own scarf pulled tight round her throat—garroting, they called it. The body was found huddled in a corner of the seat in the early morning by one of the park keepers. He'd given his usual cry—"All out, all out!"—the previous night, and no one, so far as he could recall, had left the garden. The whole park, in fact, was nearly empty thanks to the thunder and the sudden onslaught of rain, and he hadn't gone round the little garden; he

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had other duties. And, of course, murder isn't what you come to look for in a Royal Park.

The papers nosed out quite a lot of information about the murdered woman: Thelma Hughes, married, but believed to be living apart from her husband, aged 29, living in a flat in Marylebone. She had a job in a Bayswater Hotel. The previous day she'd been off duty since three o'clock. She'd been leaving the hotel a bit later, presumably to keep an appointment. The weather of the early afternoon had been fresh and a little cloudy, but the ensuing storm had taken everyone by surprise. Great black clouds had scudded across the sky, the wind had risen, thunder had pealed; later had come the rain, but the girl's clothes weren't wet. She must have met her fate, as they used to say, before the storm broke.

On such an afternoon it would be a sort of twilight in the little garden, and she'd been found lying back against the seat, as though resting or asleep. No one would have tried to speak to her or disturb her. Whatever had been the motive of the crime, it wasn't theft, for her bag containing ten pounds in notes hadn't been touched, and there were rings on her fingers and a brooch and necklace at her throat. Nor, we were assured, had there been any attempt at assault. She would have chosen this place thinking it was secret and safe. But if you're shut off from the world, the world is equally shut off from you.

The hotel where she was employed couldn't supply much information; she'd been working for them for a little more than a year, having come from a reputable hotel on the west coast. They knew of no particular men friends, and she had confided in no one. It wasn't even certain that her husband was still alive, or, if alive, was still a resident in England. She'd never spoken of him to anyone. The police advertised for him, of course, but no one came forward. Taken by and large, she was a woman of mystery, and, until now, of no particular interest to anyone.

A day or so after the news broke I was hurrying through the park in the late afternoon; the sky looked ominous and I wanted to escape a wetting. My old lady wasn't on her usual seat, but to my surprise I found her up by the pond. The shelter cut off a lot of the wind, she explained. When she saw me, for the first time she jumped up and came toward me.

"I hoped I'd see you," she

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said. "You weren't here yesterday."

"I wasn't in this part of London," I explained. "We've had a bit of a rush on. You know, you'll catch your death of cold."

"I wanted to see you," she said. "I want some advice and there's no one else to ask."

She spoke more loudly than usual, and I looked round, but people had packed up with the threatened break in the weather and we had this part of the park to ourselves. The few ducks that were about were blown clownishly by the wind, and all the kite flyers had gone.

"I couldn't ask them," she repeated.

I knew she meant her fellow boarders.

"Ask them what?" I said.

"What I ought to do. About that poor girl."

"What poor girl?" For a moment I hadn't got the drift of her meaning.

"The one they found in the garden, of course. You must have heard—it was on the radio—being a royal garden, I mean."

"That one," I said a bit blankly. "But I don't understand where you come in. If you're afraid you might be next you've only got to keep away from the spot and—"

She was almost shaking me in her agitation. "You don't understand. I saw him!"

That staggered me. "You saw . . .? Think what you're saying. Whom did you see?"

"I don't know. But he must have been the one." She calmed a little, and became more coherent. "You remember how the weather broke that afternoon. I'd been up here by the pond, all the cygnets were out and the parent birds, a lovely show, and then suddenly it got dark and I thought the storm might break before I got back, so I made for the garden as being the nearest shelter."

"Yes," I encouraged her.

"And I saw them."

"Get this straight," I said. "You saw—what? Two people in the garden. There were probably others."

"No. Only those two. I was walking round looking at the flowers and as I turned the corner there they were, sitting in the farthest seat. I thought at first they were a pair of lovers having a tiff, the way young people do, goodness knows, it's natural enough, and I was going to move away because no one wants eavesdroppers at a time like that when I heard her. . ."

She paused, drawing a deep breath.

"You mean you heard her speak?" I said.

"Yes. I couldn't help it.

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Anyone near me would have heard her, too. She said, 'It's no use, Gerald. I've got you like *that*.' I thought at first it might be—" She hesitated.

"You thought—?"

"I did think she might be telling him she was going to have a baby and he'd have to marry her. You read about that kind of thing."

"But there was nothing in the paper about her being pregnant," I said.

"Yes. I noticed that. But—oh, sir"—she had never called me sir and she had never held onto my sleeve as she was holding onto it now—"there was no love there. I know the voice of love, even when you're quarreling, but this was something different. She was dangerous to him."

"Since he presumably murdered her—" I began and then I stopped. "Did you see him?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I told you, I went back."

"Then how can you be sure it was the same couple? I daresay there were plenty of people in the garden that afternoon?"

"There was a flash of lightning. I saw that little gold cap she was wearing—the papers made a point of that, they thought someone might remember seeing it. Oh, she was the one, I'm sure. What I wanted to ask you was what should I do now? I mean, should I tell the police? My husband always said, 'Keep away from the police, Alice.' They don't do any good, being mixed up with them, I mean."

"If you have any idea who he is—" I said doubtfully.

"I do have a feeling I've seen him somewhere, but of course I see so many, and they all look so very much alike. If they've a dog or a child, that's different, or if they're like that old tramp—didn't someone say once it was depressing how alike old women become? But I do know they say that when anything sensational happens, there are always people coming forward to get the limelight."

"You don't want the limelight," I said.

"I want to do what's right. It must be someone who knows the neighborhood or he'd never have suggested the garden."

"Unless she suggested it."

"I hadn't thought of that," she admitted. "I hoped I'd see you yesterday—if I was to ask any of them at the house, even mention the police, I'd find my room was wanted. Oh, I daresay it's against the law turning people out for no real reason, but there's ways of getting round the law. They can say you're not fit to look after

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yourself or something."

I imagined her at the police station, and some ambitious young constable listening to her and perhaps writing her off as one of those old sensation-mongers, just as she'd said. There'd be the newspapers, too.

"Do you think you really saw enough of him?" I wondered. "You didn't hear him speak."

"I've been trying to remember. But I didn't stop," she went on quickly, "the thunder had started and the lightning and I wanted to get home. I thought, it's nothing to do with me, people are always quarreling, and they don't thank you to interfere. I mean, I couldn't have done anything, could I? I couldn't guess how it would end, but I do think now if they'd known I was there, it might not have come to this."

"You can't torture yourself like that," I said roughly. We had moved away from the pond, toward her gate. The thunder that had been growling softly burst into a sudden roar. I felt her shudder.

"I've always hated thunder," she said. "My mother used to tell me it was the angels quarreling. And I shouldn't have troubled you. I ought to be able to make up my own mind. That's what William would have said—William was my husband. I won't do anything tonight, I want to get back before the rain breaks, but I'll sleep on it. My mother always said things are clearer in the dawn, before your ideas have had a chance to get muddled. I'll think about it"—I felt oddly sure she meant she would also pray about it—"and in the morning I'll know what to do."

In the distance I heard the anonymous voice calling, "All out, all out!" I looked round. We virtually had the park to ourselves.

"We don't want to get locked in," said Alice. "I'll take the short cut through the trees."

"Mind how you go," I said.

I saw her feet slipping on the wet grass.

"I'll be all right," she called. "You don't have to worry about me."

She was like some strange spirit dodging among the tree trunks.

I reached the gate in the north wall just before it was locked. The rain was coming down hard by then, and there was no hope of a taxi and the buses were crammed. I remembered my old lady's voice.

Things are clearer in the dawn.

Next morning I woke to what might have been a

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different world. The sun shone, the whole world sparkled. I took my short cut through the park, but there was no Alice—what was her other name? We never exchange names, she had said. You like to keep yourself to yourself. Charlotte Race's seat was occupied, though, by the villainous old tramp, who was busy spreading his flotsam and jetsam. He was grinning evilly to himself.

I strode past without meeting his eye. She wasn't up by the pond, either, though the children were coming along with their mothers or *au pair* girls, and the first kite flyers were gathering. Someone went past whistling. I recognized the tune. It had been old when I was a child. How did it go? Something like—*Alice, where are you?* I remembered I still didn't know her second name.

I learned it, though, that night. It had been one of those busy days and the evening rush was accumulating round the subway station where people were stopping to buy copies of the evening editions. There was no paper seller there—there never was; people just threw down their money and helped themselves. I never saw anyone take a paper without paying for it or saw anyone help himself to the loose change lying around. It's one of the odd quirks of honesty in a society that isn't particularly thin-skinned.

The man in front of me threw down his money and picked up a paper. For a moment the staring black headlines almost hit me in the face.

Second Park Murder
Another Woman
Found Strangled

it ran, and I put my money down and grabbed a paper.

"An elderly woman who has been identified as Mrs. Alice Calcraft, a pensioner living in an apartment house in W. 8., was found in the early hours of this morning among the trees near the North Gate of Phillimore Park. She had been strangled by a scarf she was wearing. This is the second case of a woman being found garroted in the park during the past 48 hours. The police are examining a theory that a maniacal killer has escaped from some mental home or hospital and is roaming at large."

There was even a warning that unaccompanied women shouldn't roam in the park after dusk.

I stood there like a man riven in stone. People went past and the pile of papers rapidly reduced.

Alice Calcraft, I thought. So that was her full name. A

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harmless innocent old woman—but that wasn't true any more. Not harmless, not innocent. She'd heard a blackmailing little trollop threaten a man's life—that was what it amounted to, years of dependence winding up in ruin—oh, there are some chances a man can't take. And just because of those few words she'd had to forfeit her life.

A hand fell on my arm. I almost jumped out of my skin.

"What's up, Gerald?" said a voice. I looked up and it was a chap I knew in Fleet Street. "You're as white as a sheet. Burning the candle . . .?"

"She called him Gerald," insisted a ghostly voice.

It's no use, Gerald. I've got you like *that*.

"You look as though you could do with a strengthener at The Bull before you join the rush-hour crowd," the chap went on. "Join me."

I looked round. There was no one else with us.

So I folded my paper under my arm and followed him to The Bull.

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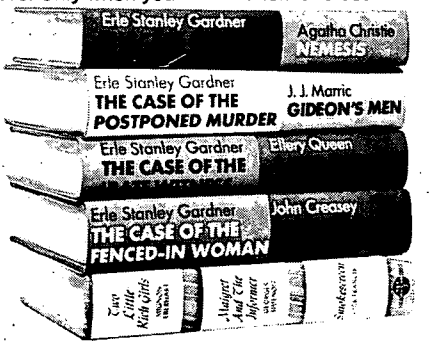

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